

here the daisies guard you from every harm

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here the daisies guard you from every harm

by [bonesandthebees \(bonesandcacti\)](#)

Summary

“You- You’re so fucking stupid, Wilbur!” Tommy sniffled into his shirt. “Why would- why would you do that! Why did you volunteer for me?”

Wilbur raised a hand up to rest on top of Tommy’s head, and started carding his fingers through his curls. “I promised that you’d be safe, didn’t I?”

or, Wilbur is willing to do anything to protect his little brother. Even if that means volunteering in his place for the Hunger Games.

Notes

hello everyone i bring you another au!

so, fun fact about me, I have a minor hyperfixation on the Hunger Games. I could probably write a ten page essay on why it's one of the best dystopia books of our time right up there with 1984 and Fahrenheit 451. this fic isn't really gonna touch on the reasons why I love it so much in *that* sense (I'm not going to be critiquing capitalism or explaining the just-war theory in this fic or anything) but this fic is going to focus on a lot of the trauma and pain that comes with the experience of being in the Games so please read the tags! this stuff is gonna be sad!

anyway this thing is already entirely written so I'll be posting the first chapter today, the second chapter tomorrow, and the third chapter on monday, so make sure to subscribe so you get updates! hope you guys enjoy! <3

a beautiful day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was such a shame that it was a beautiful day.

Wilbur leaned back into the soft grass, letting the flowers tickle his hair as he stared up at the cloudless blue sky above his head. A pleasant breeze rolled over the hills, ruffling his hair and making the tall grass fronds sway in time with the wind.

If he closed his eyes, he could almost pretend it was a normal day. If focused on the smell of the flowers washing over him, and the sun gently warming his skin as it rose higher and higher in the sky with every passing minute, then maybe he could let himself forget why today was the worst day of the year.

As his eyes fluttered shut, he felt thin fingers run through his hair and grinned.

“What are you doing?” Wilbur asked, not opening his eyes.

“There’s a spider in your hair,” his little brother replied, and after another moment the fingers left his hair.

Blinking open his eyes again, Wilbur was greeted with the sight of Tommy sitting over him, hand held up in front of his face. The rising sun shone against the back of Tommy’s head, making his bright blond hair practically glow as he stared at a black spider crawling along his finger. There was no fear in Tommy’s eyes as the spider crawled further up onto his wrist, and Wilbur almost laughed at the smile he saw form on the boy’s face.

“You’re probably one of the only kids I’ve met that actually likes spiders,” Wilbur teased, head still cradled by the soft grass.

“People who are afraid of spiders are just big pussies,” Tommy muttered, moving his other hand over to catch the spider when it tried to crawl up his shirt. “Like look at this little guy! He’s not bothering anyone!”

“I guess most people are just afraid of a spider biting them, which is why they don’t want to pick them up,” Wilbur explained.

“I bite too, bitch. Spiders aren’t special.”

Wilbur barked out a surprised laugh. “That’s a good point. Guess you and spiders aren’t so different.”

Tommy nodded, still smiling as he stared at the spider. After a few more moments of letting it run around on his hand, he sighed and dropped his hand onto the ground. Wilbur sat back up as the spider disappeared into the grass, and once it was gone, Tommy slumped against Wilbur’s shoulder.

“I wish I was a spider,” he whispered, running his hand over the petals of a flower next to his knee. “Spiders don’t need to go to the Reaping.”

There was a pain in Wilbur’s chest as he wrapped an arm around Tommy’s shoulders to pull him close. “Don’t worry about the Reaping, Toms,” he said softly. “It’s your first year so your name is only in there once. You’re not gonna be the one they call.”

“But it could be,” Tommy whimpered. “It could be me, and then I’d have to go into the Games-”

“It’s not going to happen,” Wilbur repeated, cutting Tommy off. “You’re not gonna be in the Games. I promise.”

Tommy hummed in the way he always did when he didn’t believe what Wilbur was saying. While Wilbur wanted to repeat the words over and over until Tommy knew they were true, he also knew there wasn’t much point in it. Technically, he couldn’t promise that Tommy’s name wasn’t going to get called. Out of the thousands of names in that jar, only one had Tommy’s name on it, but the probability wasn’t zero.

Wilbur’s name was in there more than it should have been for an eighteen year old. Although he hadn’t had to take it out every year, there had been some rough years for their family, meaning Wilbur had taken out tesserae for the three of them. The first time Wilbur had signed up for tesserae, Phil had been furious with him as he had done it without telling his father beforehand, but Wilbur didn’t care. It made sure that they always had some kind of backup food, something to make sure that if it came down to the wire, they would have something to live off of.

That year had been a bad winter, and the oil and grain given to them by the tesserae ended up being essential. Wilbur never regretted his decision.

This was Wilbur’s last Reaping. While a part of him was relieved that he wasn’t going to be at risk of getting thrown in the Games anymore, he also hated knowing that Tommy was about to experience the same thing. The same terror-filled day once a year, for the next seven years. It was a horrible experience, and Wilbur hated that his little brother was about to go through it for the first time.

But there wasn’t anything he could do to stop it. Right now, all he could do was make promises to his brother that he would be safe, and do his best to ensure Tommy’s name would never have to be entered extra times.

“The sun’s getting high,” Tommy said after a few minutes of silence. “Phil’s gonna want us home soon.”

“Yeah, we should head out,” Wilbur agreed, swallowing down the lump in his throat. “It’s gonna take us forever to wash away the ten layers of dirt caked on you, gremlin child.”

“Hey! I’m not that dirty!” Tommy protested as Wilbur pulled him to his feet.

“I’m pretty sure I can still see the mud in your hair from when you were splashing in those puddles with Tubbo the other day,” Wilbur teased, reaching over to ruffle Tommy’s hair.

“Fuck off!” Tommy yelled, slapping Wilbur’s hand away.

Wilbur laughed, and it echoed through the valley below.

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“Does it hurt?”

Tommy was staring at the check-in tables that led into the town plaza, eyes wide as the peacekeepers pricked the fingers of every child that passed through to log them into the system by their blood.

Although he was trying to hide it, Wilbur could see the way his shoulders were shaking, and his breath was coming a little faster than normal. Bending down so he was at eye level with his little brother, Wilbur placed his hands on Tommy’s shoulders and squeezed them reassuringly.

“It only hurts for a second. Just follow the other kids and once you get into your age group, find Tubbo and stick with him. I’ll find you after, I promise,” Wilbur told him.

Tommy nodded. “O-Okay then. I’ll see you soon.”

Before he joined the line, Tommy ran forward to wrap his arms around Wilbur’s waist, burying his face in his chest. Wilbur hugged him back, squeezing tightly before he was pushing the boy away, knowing the peacekeepers would yell at them if they held things up.

Wilbur barely felt the prick against his finger as he was logged into the system. He passed through into the plaza, quickly finding the section for the eighteen year old boys but keeping an eye out for Tommy’s blond hair.

It didn’t take long to spot him. He was a bit further up, closer to the front, and was huddled closely to another head of bright blond hair. Wilbur breathed a sigh of relief. Thank god he’d found Tubbo. The two would comfort each other while the Reaping was going on.

Loud footsteps echoed across the plaza, and a hush fell over the crowd immediately. Looking to the front stage, Wilbur watched as the Capitol escort made their way up the steps, their heavy, dark boots contrasting with the brightly-colored suit and blouse they wore.

Eret was a relatively new Capitol escort for their district, with this only being their third year fulfilling the role. They were younger than most of the escorts, only a few years older than Wilbur himself. While Wilbur didn’t like anyone from the Capitol just on principle, he had to admit that Eret was better than the last escort. Some people from the Capitol were hard to look at with their terrifyingly inhuman makeup and strangely-structured hair. But while Eret’s clothes screamed of Capitol fashion, everything above the neck was kept a bit more simple.

Today, their dark hair was left loose and only controlled by a thin golden circlet that was resting on top like a crown. Along with that, they had the same dark sunglasses they always

wore resting on the bridge of their nose, making it impossible to get even the smallest glimpse of their eyes. It wasn't the worst fashion statement a Capitol person could make, but it was unnerving nonetheless.

Eret walked up to the podium and tapped the mic a few times, an echo reverberating over the square.

"Welcome everyone!" They greeted in the standard cheeriness of the Capitol, a jarring contrast to the solemnity of the kids and parents gathered in the plaza. "It's such a beautiful day today, which I think is perfect to kick off the 74th annual Hunger Games, don't you agree?" The crowd was silent, but Eret didn't blink twice. "Anyway, let's get things started. Now, before we begin, we have a very special film brought to you by the Capitol!"

And with that, the Reaping had begun. Every year they had to sit through this stupid clip, listening as President Schlatt discussed the institution of the Hunger Games and how it was a punishment for the failed uprising nearly a hundred years before. It was the same bullshit put on repeat, and Wilbur tuned the entire thing out at this point. Instead, he kept his gaze focused on the back of Tommy's head, noticing how his hand was wrapped tightly around Tubbo's.

It was going to be fine. In a few minutes, the Reaping was going to be over, and he, Tommy, and Phil were going to go home and have an extra large dinner to celebrate neither of them getting picked.

As the film completed its run, Eret nodded to himself before smiling at the crowd once more.

"Never gets old, does it?" They laughed, although it sounded forced. "Anyway, now the time has come for us to select one courageous young man and woman for the honor of representing District 12 in this year's annual Hunger Games. So may the odds be ever in your favor." There was another pause, and Wilbur didn't really understand why they seemed to expect some kind of applause at this point when they clearly weren't going to get it.

"Alright, ladies first," they then said, clapping their hands together.

Walking over to the glass bowl on the left, Eret picked a name off the top and read it out. Wilbur didn't recognize the girl, but he heard a wail and watched as one of the older girls stumbled out of her section. She was struggling to hold back tears as she walked up to the stage, and Eret ignored her pain with practiced ease.

"And now for the boys," Eret continued once the girl was settled on the stage. Wilbur's heart began to pound as Eret reached into the glass bowl on the right, digging around for a few beats before carefully taking out a small slip of paper.

Fuck. *Fuck*. Don't be Tommy. Please don't let it be Tommy.

Stepping back up to the mic, Eret unfolded the paper and read the name.

"Tommy Soot!"

And just like that, it was as if Wilbur's entire center of gravity was flipped upside down. He stared in mute horror, blood rushing in his ears as he saw Tommy stiffen up, while Tubbo threw his arms around Tommy's shoulders.

There was dead silence as the crowd waited for Tommy to walk out. Wilbur couldn't move. He couldn't breathe. This wasn't real. This couldn't be real. His name was only in there once. The odds were in Tommy's favor. They were unbelievably in his favor. This couldn't be happening.

Slowly, Tommy pried himself away from Tubbo. Somehow, it wasn't until Wilbur saw Tommy leave his group to head towards the stage that he finally regained control of his limbs.

"Tommy!" Wilbur shouted, running to the center walkway towards the stage.

Tommy immediately whirled around, his eyes wide with terror. He opened his mouth to say something, but a peacekeeper was at his back, pushing him towards the stage.

Wilbur tried to run forward to grab him, to try and do *something* to keep Tommy from getting on that stage, but two peacekeepers were grabbing his arms and dragging him backwards.

"Wait!" Wilbur begged, struggling to fight against the guards. "Tommy!"

Images flashed through his mind at a rapid fire pace. Tommy running for his life. Tommy covered in his own blood. Tommy's lifeless eyes staring into a camera.

He couldn't let Tommy go into the Hunger Games. He couldn't sit back and watch as his baby brother got slaughtered on live TV. He wouldn't be able to bear it.

Suddenly, a realization popped into his head, and the words were out of his mouth before he could think about them.

"I volunteer! I volunteer!" He screamed, shoving against one of the peacekeepers pulling him back.

There was a soft gasp from the people around him as the peacekeepers dropped their arms, letting Wilbur step forward. This time, he looked up at the stage, meeting Eret's sunglasses in a flat stare.

"I volunteer as tribute," he repeated.

Eret raised their eyebrows.

"Well, it seems we, um, have a volunteer!" They said, the surprise clear in their voice.

Without the peacekeepers separating them, Wilbur wasted no time in running towards Tommy. The boy latched onto him as Wilbur rested a hand on his head, taking a shaky breath before pushing him back and leaning down so they were eye to eye again.

"You need to go find Phil," Wilbur told him.

“What?! No-”

“Tommy, go find dad,” Wilbur repeated, cutting off Tommy’s shaky protest.

“No! I’m not leaving!” Tommy yelled, his voice cracking.

“I’m so sorry, please, just go-”

“Wilbur no! You can’t!” Tommy was starting to scream now, and he was clutching Wilbur’s arms so tight he could feel his nails digging into his skin.

From the crowd, another blond head appeared, and Wilbur breathed a sigh of relief when he recognized Tubbo rushing towards them. Wilbur pried Tommy off of him despite his screaming protests, and Tubbo grabbed Tommy’s hand to forcibly drag him away. Tubbo had always been stronger than Tommy, and right now that was proving to be a great help as Tommy struggled to fight against his friend to get back to Wilbur’s side.

Tubbo and Wilbur shared a single look. While there was a deep sadness in Tubbo’s gaze, there was also relief. Relief that Wilbur had taken Tommy’s place. Wilbur understood.

Wilbur watched with his heart in his throat as Tubbo dragged Tommy away, while Tommy screamed to try and get back to him.

Then, peacekeepers were surrounding him on all sides, blocking his view of Tommy and Tubbo. Wilbur turned around to face the stage again, noticing the hand pressing against his back and pushing him forward.

There was no backing out now.

A numbness settled over Wilbur as he trudged up the steps to the stage. It was heavy, weighing down his shoulders like a physical blanket. His chest ached as he stared out into the crowd, searching for his father but not being able to find him.

Eret put their hands on Wilbur’s shoulders once he was up the steps, guiding him towards the mic. When they were both settled in front of it, Eret flashed a smile at him. “So, what’s your name?”

Wilbur was still desperately trying to find Phil in the crowd of sad faces as he answered in an almost robotic fashion. “Wilbur Soot.”

“Soot? Was that your brother, then?” Eret asked, their smile lessening a bit.

“Yeah, that was my brother,” Wilbur answered on autopilot.

“Well, then let’s have a round of applause for our very first volunteer,” Eret said, holding their hands up and clapping them a few times.

The crowd stayed silent. They stared at Wilbur with the solemnity of a funeral, and he supposed in a way that’s exactly what this was. A pre-emptive funeral.

Eret then took a step back and placed one hand on Wilbur's shoulder, and their other hand on the girl tribute's shoulder.

"Now come on you two, shake hands."

Wilbur did as he was told, although he couldn't even feel the girl's hand as he shook it.

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The doors to the waiting room flew open as Tommy sprinted inside, tears streaming down his cheeks as he slammed into Wilbur's chest.

"You- You're so fucking stupid, Wilbur!" Tommy sniffled into his shirt. "Why would- why would you do that! Why did you volunteer for me?"

Wilbur raised a hand up to rest on top of Tommy's head, and started carding his fingers through his curls. "I promised that you'd be safe, didn't I?"

Another sob broke out from Tommy, and Wilbur hugged him tighter. Then, there was movement at his side, and Wilbur glanced over to see his father watching him with a grim expression.

As if sensing the moment, Tommy pulled away from Wilbur, but still clung onto his hand. Using his free hand, Wilbur surged forward to wrap his arm around his father, having to bend down to bury his face into Phil's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, dad," Wilbur mumbled into the fabric. "I'm sorry but I couldn't-"

"It's okay," Phil reassured him, running his hands over Wilbur's back. "You were protecting your brother, and I'm so proud of you for that." Despite his words, Phil's voice was wavering, and Wilbur could feel tears hitting the top of his head.

There was a moment of silence, and Wilbur wondered if he should be crying right now. Tommy was crying, and so was Phil, but Wilbur just felt... empty. The sadness was there, and threatened to swallow him whole. But he had no desire to cry.

He allowed himself a minute. Then, he pulled away from Phil's hug and used his free hand to place it on his father's shoulder.

"Look, Phil, you can't shut down like when mom died," he said without preamble. "I'm not going to be there to take care of you guys this time."

Phil flinched at the mention of their mother. "I won't."

"Promise me."

Phil nodded. "I promise, but you have to promise me something in return."

"Yeah, of course."

Taking a shaky breath, Phil brought his hand up to Wilbur's cheek. "You have to promise you're not gonna give up, no matter what happens. I don't care what the fucking odds are, clearly they're bullshit considering Tommy's name got called in the first place."

Wilbur clenched his jaw. The idea of him winning compared to all the other tributes—some of whom had trained their whole lives for the Games—it was laughable.

Still, he could see the desperation in his father's gaze. Could see the way he was struggling to hold it together. Even if the idea of Wilbur winning was ridiculous, he could still try. That was a promise he could uphold.

"Alright, I promise I won't give up," he said quietly.

"You have to win," Tommy jumped in, apparently having run out of his patience and throwing himself against Wilbur again. "I swear to fucking god, if you don't win I'm gonna kick your ass."

Normally, Wilbur would point out that if he was dead, Tommy couldn't kick his ass. But he decided not to, and just nodded.

"I'm going to try my best," he whispered into Tommy's hair.

Just then, the doors to the waiting room slammed open again, and Wilbur's stomach dropped when he saw the peacekeepers waiting on the other side.

"Can I please get just a few more minutes—"

"No, your time is up," the peacekeeper said as he barged into the room.

Breath hitching, Wilbur nodded and pried Tommy off of him for a second time that day. He turned and gave his father another hug, and felt Phil press a kiss into his hair before he pulled back.

"I love you," Phil told him.

"I love you too, dad," Wilbur whispered.

Then he glanced down at Tommy, and bent down so they were at eye level again. "I love you, Toms. I promise I'm going to do my best out there."

Sniffing again, Tommy nodded. "I love you too, asshole. You better come home."

Wilbur just nodded and ruffled Tommy's hair as the peacekeepers guided him and Phil out. Then, the doors clicked shut again, and Wilbur was alone.

Utterly, and terribly alone.

There were a lot of legends about the infamous Blood God of the Games. How he had single-handedly killed over half of the tributes in the arena. How he was possibly one of the most terrifying tributes the Games had ever seen.

The man sitting in front of Wilbur who was supposed to be his mentor was... not what he expected.

With pink hair tied into a loose braid and a pair of reading glasses perched on his nose, Technoblade didn't seem like the same tribute that had killed thirteen people in a complete bloodbath of a tournament. Hands that must've been stained red were holding a thick book on mythology, and the man was leaning back on the couch with complete ease.

The girl tribute had asked Techno for advice on how to survive. Wilbur had yet to say anything since they'd gotten on the train.

"You want my advice on how to stay alive?" Techno asked, raising an eyebrow at the two of them. "Don't die. It's as simple as that."

"Of course we're trying not to die. That's kind of the whole reason we're asking for your fucking advice," Wilbur said, speaking up for the first time.

Techno's flat expression didn't change. "Then it seems like you've got it all figured out, now don't you?"

So suffice to say, the Blood God was absolutely useless as a mentor.

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Training was something Wilbur knew he wasn't going to be good at. He had never been the athletic type, preferring to practice his guitar or help Phil gather berries in the forest. Fighting was never his forte, and the training they received prior to the Games only provided further proof of that.

There were a few training sessions all tributes were required to participate in. Some basic fighting techniques, a lesson on how to start a fire, how to put an opponent in a chokehold to knock them out in seconds, things like that. Besides those few required sessions though, they were left to their own devices in the training center.

Wilbur tested out a few weapons during his days of training, and found that he wasn't half bad with a crossbow. He ended up splitting his time between trying to improve his skills with the crossbow and learning more standard survival skills, like snares and plant identification. Along with finding a hidden talent for the crossbow, Wilbur also discovered he had a knack for snares and knot tying. The trainer he worked with at the knot-tying station theorized that it was because his fingertips were heavily calloused after years of guitar playing, making it easier for him to twist the rope around his fingers in complicated shapes. The trainer was probably bullshitting him just to make him feel better, but it worked all the same.

Although Wilbur didn't talk to any of the other tributes, save for the occasional conversation with the girl from his district, he noticed a boy watching him from time to time. He was

young—likely twelve years old—and had a shock of red hair with a few white streaks throughout it. His features were pointed, and in a way, he reminded Wilbur of a fox.

Wilbur tried not to meet the kid's gaze when he caught him staring at him from afar. The boy reminded him too much of Tommy, with his skinny arms and wide eyes. Just looking at the kid made Wilbur think of how that could've been Tommy, and nausea would rise in his throat.

Despite the relative success of training, the more time he spent in the training center, the less confidence Wilbur had in his ability to win. This was because the other tributes, frankly, were *terrifying*.

This was no surprise with the tributes who had trained their whole lives to join the Games—the Careers from Districts 1, 2, and 4. They were all well-muscled and highly skilled with just about every weapon available in the training center, and even more terrifying when it came to their specialties. He watched the girl from 1 relentlessly batter a trainer with a sword, while the boy from 2 rendered another tribute unconscious with a single punch to the face during a sparring session.

There was no way he would be able to go head to head with any Careers. It was something he was going to have to avoid at all costs. On the plus side (well, it wasn't exactly a good thing, but it could work to his benefit), the Careers didn't seem to think of him as a threat. The only thing he had going for him in terms of physical prowess was his height, but after a few very poor attempts at sparring, the Careers laughed at how shitty his skill with a sword was.

At the end of each day, Wilbur and the girl tribute from his district would report to Technoblade what they did and how they were progressing. And to Wilbur's surprise, Techno was actually rather helpful in this area.

"Wilbur, it's great that you're good with snares and things like that, but you need to figure out how to defend yourself. Obviously you're not going to become a sword master in the span of a week, and while your skills with a crossbow aren't bad, you won't be good enough to go head to head with a Career by the time the Games start. You need to constantly be thinking outside the box, take the other tributes by surprise. The Careers are trained to deal with sword battles and hand to hand combat. What's a way you can hurt them in a way they aren't prepared for?" Techno explained to him one evening, his red eyes boring into Wilbur's across the coffee table.

"I... I'm not sure," Wilbur admitted, looking at the ground. "Traps are the only thing I can think of."

Humming, Techno tapped his chin. "How familiar are you with explosives?"

"Um, not very. There's not a lot of tech work in twelve, as you know," Wilbur said, wringing his hands in front of him.

"There's a station for explosives in the Training Center, which teaches you how to make a few combustible packages out of stuff you might find in the arena. Get familiar with it and try to memorize how to make some of them, got it?"

Wilbur nodded. He could do that.



Soon, there were interviews. The time for Wilbur to try and make the Capitol like him, pretending as though he didn't hate their guts.

Techno was absolutely useless in terms of training him for this. The man was socially awkward as hell, and had gone for the intimidating and silent effect during his own interview instead of trying to woo the crowd over. Given Techno's bulky frame and high score during training, it worked in his favor, letting the crowd know he was not someone to be messed with.

There was no way Wilbur could pull that off. Having only gotten a six with his training scores, he knew no one found him intimidating or even perceived him as a threat. Instead, he was going to have to be charming if he had any hope of getting sponsors.

Wilbur should've been good at this. Talking had always been his strong suit. Phil had often joked that Wilbur could talk himself out of handcuffs if he put his mind to it, saying that he should have been a siren in another life.

But Wilbur had no idea if he could muster up a fake smile for this. He knew the second he looked out at the crowd, meeting the grinning, horrendously bright faces of Capitol citizens who were on the edge of their seats ready to watch him die, he was going to be filled with so much disgust that the idea of even pretending to like the Capitol was going to be impossible.

Still, he had to try. If he didn't, he would be breaking his promise to his family. A sponsor could be the difference between life and death out in the Arena. He was already dealing with such bad odds—he needed all the possible help he could get.

Bad had been the one to interview the tributes for decades now, and no one could tell you how old he was. Unlike most bright fashion in the Capitol, Bad was never seen without a dark, hooded cloak covering his face. The only part of his face that you could make out were his unnaturally bright eyes, and glowing white teeth.

Yet, despite his foreboding appearance, Bad was a calming presence for the often nervous tributes. He had a special effect on the younger tributes, talking to them in a soft voice and calling them 'muffins' to make them laugh. It was almost sweet, until you remembered the kids he was interviewing were going to be dead in a few days time.

This was especially notable with the red-haired boy Wilbur had noticed in the training center. His name was Fundy, and although he was quiet at first, Bad soon got him talking about machinery, leading him to excitedly ramble about all the different things he could invent. Once again, it made Wilbur think of his brother.

Wilbur stood at the edge of the stage, fiddling with the cuffs of his soot-covered suit. Seriously, it was kind of ridiculous how the only thing stylists could seem to think of for coal was 'black dust'. His pale grey suit had been sprinkled with soot along the shoulders and arms to create a speckled pattern, and dark, glittering makeup had been drawn under his eyes.

It definitely could have been worse though, and he supposed there was a certain irony in Wilbur Soot walking out onto a stage covered in soot.

The girl from his district was just finishing up her own interview. While she was trying to go for a more coy and cunning demeanor, her nerves were obvious with the way she was constantly tapping her foot and repeating her words. It wasn't the worst interview, but it wasn't good for her either. Wilbur almost felt bad.

Almost. If she did a poor job, he could look better in comparison.

There was a round of applause from the audience as the girl got up and made her way off the stage, a bit of soot being left behind by the train of her dress. Then, Bad was standing up and pointing towards Wilbur, and he heard his name being announced followed by another round of cheers and yelling.

A wave of nausea rolled through him as he stared out at the brightly grinning faces in the crowd. He hated them. He hated all of them so fucking much.

Tommy and Phil, he reminded himself. *Just imagine you're talking to them.*

Somehow, he managed to flash a fairly convincing smile at the audience and waved at them as he settled into his chair. Then, he turned to shake the hand Bad was offering, and jumped a little at how warm his skin was.

"It's so nice to meet you, Wilbur," Bad said, his bright teeth flashing under the shadows of his hood.

"It's a pleasure to meet you too, Bad," Wilbur replied, clenching his teeth as he tried to put as much charm into his voice as he could.

The applause died down, and Bad let go of his hand to lean back in his seat. Wilbur attempted to mirror the pose, to come off as relaxed and easygoing, although he felt the exact opposite.

"So Wilbur, how's the Capitol been treating you so far?" Bad asked once things had gone quiet, folding his hands in his lap. "Must be a bit of a culture shock coming here from District 12!"

Wilbur let out a small laugh, and although he internally cringed at how fake it sounded, Bad didn't even blink twice. "Um, yeah, it's very different. The showers are weird."

The audience laughed at this, although Wilbur really didn't think it was all that funny.

From there, Wilbur started to relax a bit. Bad was good at his job, coaxing out fun one liners from Wilbur and letting him get into a groove so he didn't have to overthink every word he said. If their situation was anything but the one he was currently in, Wilbur would probably like Bad as a person.

"So tell us about yourself, Wil. What do you like to do for fun?"

Bad wanted him to talk about his *hobbies*? He supposed he should've seen this coming, given that he asked a few of the other tributes questions like this. It must've been a better way to let the audience get to know a tribute if they couldn't brag about their physical prowess.

"Uh... I play guitar a lot," he admitted, fighting the urge to pick at his nails.

"Oh! So you're a musician!" Bad exclaimed, sounding delighted. "Do you only play guitar? Or do you sing too?"

The honest answer was that yes, Wilbur sang. When Tommy was little he would sing him lullabies until his voice was hoarse to try and soothe him to sleep through hunger pains. After their mother died, whenever her birthday rolled around Wilbur would sing Phil all the songs she used to sing, so that neither of them would forget the words.

Sometimes he'd spend days at the market, sitting against the wall with his guitar in his lap, singing for the people passing by. There was so much misery in 12, but the vendors at the stalls told him he could bring rare smiles to people's faces, so he kept it up. Sometimes the little kids from the school would gather around him after classes had let out, shouting out requests with surprising fervor given how many of them had visible ribs and hollow cheeks.

His singing was for the people he loved. His family, his district. The Capitol didn't deserve that.

"No, I don't sing. Just play," Wilbur lied.

Bad gave him a doubtful look, but when he met Wilbur's eyes, he seemed to decide against pushing him for a different answer and let the conversation move on.

After making the audience laugh a few more times with their banter, Bad quieted everyone down and turned to Wilbur with the faint outline of his mouth pressed into a thin line.

"So Wilbur, you know I have to ask you about that Reaping," he said in a gentle voice, almost sounding apologetic.

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur tried not to wince when Eret saying Tommy's name rang through his ears again.

"The boy you volunteered for, that was your brother, right?" Bad asked.

Stiffly, Wilbur nodded. "My younger brother, yes. It was his first Reaping."

"And this was your last?" Wilbur nodded again, and a few of the audience members let out sympathetic noises. "I'd imagine you two are very close then."

"We are," Wilbur muttered, staring at his hands. "He's not just my little brother, but he's also my best friend. I tease him a lot, but he's honestly my favorite person in the entire world."

There was a chorus of 'awww's' and a few sobs from the audience, and Wilbur had to fight the urge to scowl. How dare they have the audacity to cry over him talking about Tommy.

They were the reason he was sitting here. It was their fault he was probably never going to see his little brother again.

“What did you say to him? When you were saying your goodbyes?” Bad asked softly.

The answer was so easy, and so pitiful at the same time.

“I promised him I would try to win.”

Bad nodded and wiped at his eye, as if he was close to tears.

“May the odds be ever in your favor, Wilbur,” Bad told him, reaching forward to shake his hand again.

There was a roaring applause as Wilbur walked off the stage, but he didn’t look back at them once.



The arena was full of green.

That was the first thing Wilbur noticed as his head whipped from side to side, desperate to try and get some handle on his surroundings before the timer dropped to zero.

They were in a clearing in the middle of a large forest. Towering trees circled the tributes, their branches rustling in the soft breeze. The sky above was blue, with a few white clouds here and there. It almost reminded Wilbur of the forest outside of 12.

His heart was racing in his chest, pounding so loudly in his ears he couldn’t hear anything else. The other tributes were all lined up in a half circle, and in the center sat the Cornucopia. Techno’s advice rose above the blood roaring in his head, his words ringing loud and clear.

Do not go for the weapons in the Cornucopia. It’s a bloodbath. Just run away as fast as you can.

Wilbur could see a crossbow sitting in the center of the Cornucopia, and Wilbur clenched his fists, knowing that getting that was going to be his closest chance to surviving. But he also knew that Techno was right, and that trying to get something from inside the Cornucopia was a death sentence.

There were backpacks scattered along the outer edges of the Cornucopia. Maybe he could grab one of those as he ran, then he wouldn’t be completely without supplies.

There were ten seconds left on the timer. Wilbur’s breath hitched.

Ten.

He couldn’t do this.

Nine.

He had to. He made a promise.

Eight.

He was going to die.

Seven.

He had to run. He knew how to run.

Six.

He wanted to throw up.

Five.

He wanted to scream.

Four.

He could feel the girl from his district glaring at him.

Three.

He hoped she didn't come after him.

Two.

He wouldn't be able to kill her if she did.

One.

He wouldn't have a choice.

And then, they were off.

Wilbur sprinted off the pedestal, using his long legs to try and grab a bulging orange backpack that was slightly closer to the center than he had planned on getting, but looked like it could be worth it.

His boots pounded on the grass. Grabbing the backpack, Wilbur swung it over his shoulder and spun towards the treeline. He had only run a few steps towards it though when he felt a heavy weight land on his back, and he cried out as he slammed into the ground.

There was a boy pinning him down, holding a knife over Wilbur's chest, ready to plunge.

Wilbur didn't even get time to process the situation before there was a sledgehammer swinging into the boy's skull, and warm blood splattered across Wilbur's face as the boy slumped to the side.

The girl from his district was the one holding the hammer, and when their eyes met, Wilbur almost wondered if she was offering an alliance. They hadn't talked about one before the Games, but maybe she saved him so they could team up?

Her eyes narrowed at him, and suddenly Wilbur realized she was lifting the hammer above her head again.

Without thinking, Wilbur kicked his legs out to swipe the girl's feet from under her. She gasped and fell to the ground, thrown off by the weight of her sledgehammer. Before she could get up, Wilbur scrambled to his feet and sprinted towards the trees.

As he ran, he felt something hard hit his backpack, but didn't stop to see what it was and just kept going. He dove into the treeline, his heart beating out of his chest as he leapt over tree roots and ducked under low hanging branches.

He needed to get as far away from the Cornucopia as possible.

So instead of taking the time to slow down, to see if anyone was actually following him, he just kept running. He ignored the burning in his lungs, the screaming in his legs, the booming cannons echoing above his head, and focused only on moving forward.

He wasn't sure how long it had been when he finally deemed it safe enough to slow down, but it had definitely been a while. As soon as he stopped moving, his legs collapsed underneath him, and Wilbur spent a good five minutes sitting against a tree, gasping for air and waiting for the black spots to disappear from his vision.

Once he was able to breathe again, Wilbur set his backpack on his lap and dug through it to see what he'd gotten.

It turned out the hard thing that hit his backpack was a throwing knife, but thankfully his bag had been thick enough that it had stopped him from being stabbed. Plus, now he had a knife.

The bag was a pretty good prize overall. There was rope, string for snares, some iodine to purify water, a pack of matches, an additional knife, an empty canteen for water, a sleeping bag, and a small bag of trail mix.

Okay, step one was done. He'd gotten away from the Cornucopia, and it didn't sound like anyone was nearby. Step two was to find water.

After he had repacked his bag, Wilbur stumbled to his feet, gasping when his legs yelled in protest. He ignored the overworked muscles and kept moving, the pain lessening once they warmed up again.

It was extremely lucky for him to just happen across a stream. His mouth was as dry as sandpaper after his sprint, and it was torture to force himself to wait thirty minutes for the iodine to go into effect before letting himself drink from his canteen.

He repeated this several times until his thirst was fully quenched. Then, he filled up his canteen again, and decided to follow the stream up to see if there was a pond nearby.

The sky was starting to turn a rather pretty shade of orange by the time Wilbur found the pond the stream came from. Kneeling next to it, Wilbur reached in to refill his canteen from the few sips he'd taken while he walked, but paused when he saw his reflection.

There was still blood splattered across his face. It had long since dried, and somehow in the craze of everything else, he'd completely forgotten it was there.

The mental image of the girl smashing that boy's skull in with the sledgehammer replayed in Wilbur's mind. Bile rose in his throat. He had watched someone *die*. And he hadn't even thought twice about it until now.

Wilbur tried not to throw up, knowing that the last thing he needed was to lose what little he had in his stomach. But it was a pointless effort, and he ended up retching next to a tree before scrambling back to the pond to wash the blood off his face.

Sitting with his knees pulled up against his chest, Wilbur thought over the death again. He didn't have time to deal with this. These were the Games, and Wilbur was probably going to see a lot more people die in the following days.

So he decided to shove that into the back of his head and focus on what he needed to do right now.

He had water. For a place to sleep, he could climb one of the trees and tie himself to the branches. So now he needed food.

Using the string, he set up a few snare traps around the pond. Hopefully that would get him something by tomorrow, because his stomach was already growling.

Wilbur was surprisingly good at climbing trees, given his lackluster arm strength and lanky figure. When they were younger, he and Tommy would always have tree climbing competitions, and the trees in 12 weren't too different from the trees in the arena.

He let himself eat half of the trail mix once he was settled. Then, as he tied the rope around his sleeping bag, an all too familiar anthem began to blare above his head. Biting back a sigh, Wilbur forced himself to look up to watch the faces flash in the sky, since it would be helpful to know how many tributes were left after today.

Faces were illuminated one by one, and there was a pit growing in his stomach as he looked at photos of the slaughtered children. At the very end, he found himself staring at the girl from his own district, and he wasn't sure whether to be upset or relieved.

On the one hand, she was from 12 just like he was. She was the only piece of home he'd had in this damn arena, and now she was dead. But on the other hand, that could've been his downfall. He wouldn't have been able to kill her if it came down to it, even after she tried to kill him today.

It was a sick mixture to be feeling. Grief that she was gone, but relief that he wasn't the one to do it. At the very least, he hoped her death had been quick.

Then, the lights turned off, and the sky was blank. Wilbur noted that the red-haired boy—Fundy—was still alive, which loosened a tiny bit of the knot in Wilbur’s chest. He also counted up the tributes, and realized that eleven had died on that day alone, meaning there were only thirteen of them left.

Somehow, despite the spikes of anxiety Wilbur would have at any movement on the forest floor, and the pained growls from his stomach (although he’d been far hungrier than this before, and knew his body could deal with it), he eventually managed to find his way into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter End Notes

and we are OFF into the Games! like I said in the beginning notes, I'll be posting the next chapter tomorrow which is going to focus on the rest of Wilbur's experience in the Games heh

Please let me know what you thought down in the comments! They seriously make my day and I read every single one of them

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

ashes to ashes

Chapter Summary

The rest of the Games.

Chapter Notes

haha... this is where things get sad

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Shockingly, the next two days were relatively quiet.

After the first night, Wilbur woke up to two rabbits caught in his snares. Although Phil was the hunter in their family and not him, he'd prepared the game Phil brought back for dinner enough times to be familiar with how to skin and cook it.

He moved away from the pond to cook the rabbits, in case the smoke attracted any nearby tributes, and made sure to stomp out the embers when he was done. Every second he spent on the ground he was on high alert, constantly checking over his shoulder, listening for the sound of footsteps on dirt, waiting for the moment someone came crashing out of the bushes to attack him.

The pond was a good place to stay though, so he didn't leave. He had water, food, and a place to sleep. If he didn't have to move, he wasn't going to.

It was on the third morning that he woke up to the smell of smoke.

There was heat licking at Wilbur's face as he gasped awake. Whipping his head around, his stomach dropped when he was met with raging hot flames consuming the stretch of forest behind him.

Untying the rope around his sleeping bag, Wilbur practically fell out of the tree, his ears ringing when he slammed his head onto the forest floor. Shaking himself off, he forced himself upright, grabbing his backpack and scrambling to his feet so he could start running.

The fire spread rapidly behind him. Wilbur hopped over tree roots and narrowly avoided rocks in his path, struggling to maintain the lead he had on the burning flames licking at his heels. It was so hot, there was sweat drenching his back, and his throat quickly grew ragged as he breathed in more and more of the harsh smoke that filled the air.

This fire wasn't natural. That much was obvious. No fire spread *this* fast, and it was so clearly was trying to push him in a specific direction. Every time he tried to veer left or right, a tree would fall or more flames would appear, driving him straight ahead.

The Gamemakers were trying to push him towards something. It wasn't hard to guess what—or who—Wilbur was going to run into.

Wilbur ran into the Career pack with smoke stung eyes and ash-covered hair. He was still sprinting to get away from the flames when another burning tree collapsed right in front of him, singeing his eyebrows and causing sparks to fly on his shirt. Wilbur struggled to regain his footing and whirled to the right when he spotted them.

Only a few trees away stood the Careers. It was all the tributes from Districts 1 and 2, along with the girl from 4. They were heavily armed, each one carrying a sharp silver weapon of some kind. The five of them were also trying to outrun the fire it seemed, but the moment their eyes locked onto Wilbur, the worries about the fire seemed to vanish from their minds.

Darting down a hill that seemed to mark the end of the fire, Wilbur struggled to keep his footing. Every breath was pained by the smoke he'd inhaled, and his eyes were filled with tears as he tried to wipe the ash out of them. Behind him, he could hear the jeering laughter of the Careers, not even sounding winded despite the smell of smoke still lingering in the air.

"Yeah! You better run, music boy!" One of the Careers called out to him.

Music boy? Really? They couldn't think of anything better?

Wilbur didn't bother responding. He was already struggling to take big enough gulps for air as it was, he didn't need to waste his lungs on pissing off the people trying to kill him.

His heart was pounding in his ears as he darted around the edges of the fire. The footsteps behind him were getting louder, the laughter echoing around him as he sprinted with all the strength he had left.

Suddenly, there was a whooshing sound next to his ear, and he gasped as a crossbow bolt struck itself into the tree trunk right next to his head. Shit. They were shooting at him now.

More bolts flew around him as he ran. At one point, pain exploded in his leg as one bolt got too close, and Wilbur cried out but forced himself to keep running. He could feel blood seeping into his pants but pressed on. If he stopped running, anything slowed him down right now, he was going to die. That was certain.

A tree fell right behind him, cutting him off from the rest of the Careers. Using the moment of distraction, Wilbur veered to the left, towards the part of the forest that wasn't burning anymore. In the distance, he heard another cannon boom.

He couldn't breathe. His lungs were screaming, his throat was blistered, and his pant leg was definitely soaked with blood by now. A bit further back now, he could still hear the Careers. Sure, the tree had given him a bit more headway, but he was starting to slow down, and they would catch him soon enough.

There was a flash of movement on his right. Wilbur stumbled to a stop, and it took him a few beats to notice a small cave hidden behind a curtain of lichen. The movement was probably an animal that had scurried inside to escape the smoke, and although it would be cramped, Wilbur knew he could squeeze himself in there.

If they found him, he'd be cornered with absolutely no way to fight back. But they were going to catch him soon if he kept running. This was his only option.

The Careers were still far enough away that they couldn't see him, so Wilbur took the opportunity to kneel down and crawl into the cave, grunting to try and fit his backpack in there as well.

Once he was past the cave entrance, he saw it opened up a little more on the inside than he thought, but it wasn't by much. He let the lichen fall in front of the cave entrance, his breaths still coming in ragged gulps as his heart thumped painfully in his chest.

The footsteps came closer to the outside of the cave, and Wilbur shrunk further into the shadows, his neck craned at an awkward angle so he didn't hit the very low ceiling.

That's when he felt a small body press against his back.

Wilbur *barely* managed to stop himself from shrieking. Instead, he whipped his head around and was met with a pair of wide brown eyes hidden under red hair, barely visible in the gloom.

It was the twelve year old boy that looked like a fox who had been watching him in the training center. Fundy.

Fundy was staring at Wilbur with pure terror in his eyes. He was pressed as far against the cave wall as he could be, and his breaths were coming in shallow gasps as his eyes darted between Wilbur's face and the cave entrance.

Wilbur was trapped in a very tiny cave with Careers on the outside, and another tribute on the inside.

Another tribute who was a child. A very, *very* scared child.

Without thinking, Wilbur held a finger up to his lips to tell Fundy to stay quiet. As the footsteps outside the cave got louder, Wilbur put his arm in front of Fundy, shielding the boy with his body as they both pressed further into the back of the cave.

This was stupid. Fundy could have a knife and use it to stab him in the back right this second.

But it wasn't like he was going to kill Fundy. So if he died to a twelve year old, so be it. Not to mention, it wasn't like he could just leave the cave, given the loud voices right in front of the lichen curtain.

"Where the hell did he go?!" A girl shouted.

“I-I lost sight of him after that tree hit Chiffon,” a boy stammered, something breaking in his voice.

“So none of us which way he went?” A different girl snapped.

“He might’ve gone down towards the creek to get water,” another boy suggested. “It’s right down the hill.”

“Fine. Let’s find him quickly. God knows the sponsors probably loved that sob story with him volunteering for his brother, so they’ll probably be sending him sponsor packages right now if he got injured,” the first girl ordered. It was clear by her tone that she was the one in charge, and none of the others protested as the group moved away from the cave entrance.

Wilbur was crouched, frozen in the shadows, straining his ears to listen as the footsteps gradually faded away. As his own heart rate began to slow, he could make out the panicked breaths coming from the small boy behind him.

They waited several more minutes in the darkness. Wilbur ignored the blood still dripping from his leg, wanting to make sure that the Careers were actually gone before making any moves out of the cave. Then, he began the painstaking process of squeezing himself out from the small space, his cramped leg muscles screaming in protest at the movement.

Fundy didn’t make any moves to follow him. He just stayed pinned to the wall, and when Wilbur glanced back, he could see the boy was watching him with the vigilance of a hawk.

Once Wilbur was free of the cave, he breathed out a sigh of relief, stretching his legs and taking a deep breath in of the now smoke-free air. It seemed as though the Gamemakers figured they’d gotten enough entertainment from the wildfire and decided to put it out, which Wilbur was very grateful for.

After taking a few deep breaths to settle himself, he crouched back down in front of the cave entrance and poked his head through the lichen, meeting the fear-blown eyes of the boy inside.

“Hey, are you alright?” Wilbur asked, trying to make his voice as gentle as possible. “You’re not hurt, are you?”

The boy stared at him for a moment, as if debating how to answer, before shaking his head slightly.

“That’s good. I got nicked by a crossbow bolt earlier so apologies if I got any blood on you,” Wilbur continued, not really sure why he was talking so much to the boy, but not feeling as if he could just get up and walk away either.

The boy was still silent.

“Your name is Fundy, right? You’re from District 3?” Wilbur asked, pretty sure at this point he wasn’t going to get a verbal response. Another nod. “I saw you during training. You’re pretty good at climbing-”

“Are you going to kill me?” Fundy cut in, his voice trembling.

“Wh- no! Of course not!” Wilbur exclaimed.

Fundy narrowed his eyes. “Why not? I’m trapped in this cave. It wouldn’t be hard.” Despite his flippant words, there was something else in his tone besides fear. He said the words as if he was hoping for Wilbur to prove him wrong. Like he wanted to trust Wilbur.

Shit. How did Wilbur get this kid to believe he wasn’t going to kill him?

“You know I volunteered for my little brother, right?” Wilbur asked softly. Fundy nodded. “He’s the same age as you. You just... remind me of him, I guess.”

Some of the blatant terror in Fundy’s eyes faded, and he uncurled himself a bit from the back of the cave.

“What’s his name again?” Fundy asked, still keeping himself away from the mouth of the cave, but letting the tension drain from his shoulders anyway.

“Tommy. His name is Tommy,” Wilbur answered, unable to hide the fondness in his voice. “And I’m Wilbur.”

Fundy nodded, biting his lip. “It’s, um, nice to meet you I guess.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” Wilbur replied. Then, he stuck a hand into the cave as an offering. “Would you want to be allies?”

A few long seconds stretched out in the silence as Fundy eyed the offered hand. Then, Fundy slowly placed his own hand in Wilbur’s, and for the first time since getting into the arena, Wilbur smiled.

After Fundy crawled out of the cave, the two decided their first course of action should be to try and find another water source since Wilbur had drained his own water canteen in an attempt to get the ash out of his throat. Fundy helped him bandage up his leg, the boy having surprising skill at wrapping up wounds, and then the two were off.

They headed back towards the smoking remains of the wildfire. They listened for any incoming Careers, but the forest was silent save for the crunch of burnt twigs under their boots. As they backtracked through the way Wilbur had run, they found the tree that had cut Wilbur off from the rest of the Career pack during the chase, and Wilbur noticed something.

There was a crossbow half-lodged underneath the charred tree trunk with its sliver of bolts scattered around it. It was the same one that had given Wilbur the cut on his leg, the one he’d seen the girl from 1 using with piss poor aim.

He thought back to the conversation the Careers had outside the cave. The girl—Chiffon—had been hit by a tree during the chase. Her body had already been taken by the Capitol hovercraft, but her crossbow had been left behind.

Wilbur was extremely grateful for the fact that her body had already been taken. He wasn't sure if he would've been able to pry the crossbow out of her dead hands if that was how he had found it.

Fundy watched him with wary eyes as he picked up the weapon and the bolts, testing the weight of it in his hands with a thoughtful hum. When Wilbur swung the crossbow towards a nearby tree, pretending to aim it, Fundy flinched and Wilbur immediately pointed the crossbow at the floor.

"Kid, if I wanted to kill you, I would've done it back in that cave," Wilbur said without thinking, before cringing at how callous his words were. "Shit, sorry, that sounded really bad but--"

"No no," Fundy cut him off, wringing his hands in front of him. "You have a point. Sorry, I'm just... still getting used to all this."

"I don't think you can ever really get used to being thrown into a death tournament," Wilbur snorted.

Fundy blinked a few times at that, before a hesitant smile grew on his face. "Yeah, you're not wrong."

They spent the rest of the daylight walking between the shade of the towering trees, searching for a new pond like the one Wilbur had been at before. The more they walked, the less tense Fundy seemed to be, his shoulders dropping as the hours went on. Although at first their walk had been silent, after asking him a few questions about himself, Fundy started rambling about technology and the different things he was in charge of building in 3.

He had a passion for programming, and was apparently a whiz at refurbishing old or broken pieces of tech. Once he got started, the boy wouldn't stop talking about all the different ways you could reprogram a holo-pad for different functions.

Wilbur loved hearing Fundy ramble about the things that interested him. It was such a jarring contrast to the near silence he'd been living in the past few days, a way to fill up the quiet with something else for company besides his own anxiety. Not to mention, Tommy would ramble in the same way, albeit with a lot more shouting and curse words mixed in.

They found a creek when the sun was only a thin line of red on the horizon. After finding a small nook next to a tree, the two of them settled down and unpacked their bags so they could compare what they had while they waited for their water to purify.

Fundy had managed to grab a backpack at the start of the Games like Wilbur did. His was a lot smaller than Wilbur's, but he still had a water canteen and iodine drops, along with some rope, matches, and all the plants he had foraged for food.

Unlike Wilbur, Fundy didn't know how to make snares. However, Wilbur realized the kid had a knack for plant identification, as evidenced by all the different types of berries he had piled in his bag.

“These are my favorite,” Fundy told him, holding out a handful of small, bright red berries. “They’re all over the arena, but you have to watch out for the bushes. They’re tiny but covered in thorns, and if you step on one it hurts really bad.”

He gave Wilbur some to try, and Wilbur was pleasantly surprised at how sweet they were. Then in turn, Wilbur pulled out the leftover rabbit meat he’d cooked the day before, and let Fundy eat a rabbit leg while he set up some more snares around their new campground.

That night, they made their way up a tall tree together, and Wilbur realized that Fundy was even better at climbing than he was. The small boy could jump between the thinnest branches with seemingly no fear, and he vaguely recalled the way the boy had swung in the rafters of the Training Center before the Games began.

When Wilbur found out that Fundy didn’t have a sleeping bag, and instead had spent his nights shivering in his thin jacket, he immediately offered for the kid to take his. Fundy refused, not wanting to take Wilbur’s only sleeping bag, and they ended up coming to the compromise of sharing it. It was certainly big enough to fit both of them, and it’s not like Fundy took up much space.

The wariness from that morning had almost completely faded from Fundy’s eyes now. He curled up against Wilbur’s side, head resting on his shoulder so they could both fit on the branch, and it was so reminiscent of the way Tommy would crawl into bed with him when he had nightmares that it made his eyes burn.

God, he missed Tommy. He missed Tommy, Phil, Tubbo—everyone from 12. He wondered how they were all holding up. If they were trying to watch as much of the Games as possible to know what he was doing, or if they were all working to distract themselves instead.

Phil was probably distracting himself. Wilbur could picture him fluttering around the kitchen, crushing herbs into poultices even if he didn’t have an order in place for them, just to keep his hands busy. Tommy, in contrast, was probably glued to the TV in the middle of their living room, making sure he didn’t miss a second of what Wilbur was doing. He wondered what Tommy thought of Fundy, and how Wilbur had allied with this boy that was the same age as him.

Maybe in another life, Tommy and Fundy could’ve been friends. Fundy definitely seemed like he’d be able to keep up with Tommy’s energy, although Tommy probably wouldn’t listen to Fundy’s rambling about technology all that much.

But Wilbur knew that wasn’t going to be possible in this lifetime. Fundy and Tommy were never going to get the chance to meet.

The anthem echoed across the arena as the girl from 1’s face flashed in the sky, and Wilbur clenched his jaw as Fundy’s breathing began to even out. He was falling asleep so easily, trusting Wilbur to protect him. And Wilbur was going to try. By god he was going to try to protect this boy.

He didn’t want to think about the day he wasn’t going to be able to protect his young ally.

Surprisingly, Wilbur slept better that night than he had since he first got into the arena.



Another full day passed with Fundy by his side, and things were... good. They spent the hours foraging for berries and checking Wilbur's snares, sticking their sore feet in the creek and talking about what things were like in their respective districts.

Both of them were waiting to hear the blast of a cannon, but the entire day passed by without a single one. Wilbur figured the Gamemakers must be giving them a rest day, considering how terrible the fire was the day before.

Wilbur had no idea where the Careers had their base located, but it seemed to be far away from where he and Fundy were. When he said as much to Fundy though, the boy surprised him with his immediate response.

"Oh, they're set up at the Cornucopia," Fundy told him, munching on some red berries. "They have a bunch of food stockpiled there, and they're guarding it constantly."

All the food stockpiled in one place?

Wilbur smirked. "Sounds like there's a good opportunity there, wouldn't you say?"

Fundy matched his grin immediately. "What are you thinking?"

The first plan was to make their way back to the Cornucopia to scope out the Career's food stash. Whether they were going to try and steal some of it, or if they were going to outright try to destroy it, Wilbur wasn't sure. First, they needed to see what they were dealing with.

The next day, the two packed up their camp, refilled their water, and headed back towards the center of the arena. They left early in the morning, but the sun was high in the sky by the time they spotted the clearing through the trees. Wilbur and Fundy hid behind a bush near the treeline, shrouded in shadow so they could watch the Careers mill about the open area.

Fundy was right. All of the food was stockpiled into the mouth of the Cornucopia. Another strange thing though was that there were holes all dug around the clearing, in seemingly random spots. Wilbur didn't understand the purpose, but Fundy figured it out immediately.

"They dug up the landmines in the clearing! The ones the Gamemakers had to disable before the Games started!" Fundy exclaimed, pointing to a stack of circular, metal boxes that sat near the mouth of the Cornucopia. "My guess is that the Careers want to try and turn them back on, but they can't figure out how."

"Is that possible? To turn them back on?" Wilbur asked, thinking of how deadly of a trap the group could make if they could do that.

"Well, I don't know if it's possible for the *Careers* to figure it out," Fundy said slowly, another grin spreading across his face. "But *I* could do it no problem."

Wilbur's eyes widened. "You could?"

“Yup! We make bombs just like that in 3 for the Capitol,” Fundy explained. “Shouldn’t be hard for me to figure out.”

“So if I could somehow get that stack of landmines and bring them to you, we’d have a huge supply of landmines for us to use against the Careers?”

Fundy nodded, his eyes shining. “We could use them to blow up their food! Then they’d be struggling to hunt just like the rest of us!”

Holy shit. That would level the playing field considerably. One of the main reasons the Careers were so dangerous was because they always claimed the majority of the food available in the Cornucopia, and never had to deal with the hunger pains most of the other tributes did. They weren’t weakened at all. But if they blew up their food...

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a plan,” Wilbur smiled.

The next plan was a bit more complicated than the first. They needed to find a way to get the Careers away from the Cornucopia so they could steal the landmines.

In the end, the plan wasn’t something Wilbur was particularly happy with, but it was the best either of them could come up with. Together, he and Fundy set up several piles of tree branches covered in bright green leaves, leading further and further away from the clearing. Fundy was going to light each of these branch piles one by one, and the smoke was going to draw the Careers away from the Cornucopia.

They were definitely going to leave a guard behind though, and that was where Wilbur’s job came in. He was going to have to find a way to draw the guard away so he could run over and steal the landmines. Then, he and Fundy were going to meet back up at their campsite, and figure out how to re-activate the landmines.

It was a risky plan. Fundy was the faster one of the two of them, hence why he was the one lighting the fires, but Wilbur still didn’t like the idea of making him be the one to have to sprint away from the Careers.

Still, Fundy insisted he could do it. And Wilbur couldn’t think of an alternative.

On the morning of, Fundy hugged Wilbur, his head not even reaching Wilbur’s shoulder.

“Stay safe, okay?” Wilbur whispered into Fundy’s hair, trying to keep his voice from wavering. “If the Careers get too close, forget about the plan and just run as fast as you can. Hide if you have to.”

“I will,” Fundy promised, burying his face into Wilbur’s chest. “You stay safe too, okay?”

“I promise.”

And then, the boy was off, and the plan began.

Wilbur hid in the bushes at the edge of the clearing, watching as the Careers noticed the smoke billowing from the first of the fires. Grabbing their weapons, three of them ran into the

trees, leaving behind the girl from 4 as a guard.

She paced around the front of the Cornucopia, idly twirling a sword in her hand. Her eyes skimmed over the treeline, but didn't notice Wilbur hidden in the shadows.

Shit, how was Wilbur supposed to do this? He wanted to avoid a fight if possible, especially considering how comfortable the girl seemed to be with that sword. Maybe he could try to throw a rock at a nearby tree so she would go investigate? But he'd have to run fast for that. Faster than he might be able to-

Wilbur's thoughts were cut off by the sound of rustling on the other side of the clearing. The girl whipped her head towards the trees, searching for the source of the sound. Then, there was a loud crashing noise, as if someone had just fallen over, and the girl brandished her sword as she sprinted into the forest.

Before Wilbur could even consider using the opportunity though, he spotted a lithe figure dart out from the treeline a little bit away from where the Career had run in. It was another girl from one of the lower districts, one he hadn't paid much attention to before. She sprinted towards the Cornucopia, quickly grabbing a small bag of apples, before running away just as quickly.

She was gone in a flash, and Wilbur wondered if she'd even been there at all. But the apples were still gone, so she had to have been real.

The girl from 4 was still in the forest, so Wilbur decided to take a page out of that other girl's book and seize his chance.

He sprinted as fast as he could towards the Cornucopia, his heart pounding in his ears as he watched the treeline for any sign of 4. Stumbling to a stop near the food pile, Wilbur grabbed an empty backpack that was shoved to the corner of the metal horn, and quickly piled the landmines in there, ignoring the way his hands shook at handling the bombs. Then, as he slung the spare backpack over his shoulder, he noticed a rather large pack of jerky nestled on top of another box of food, and grabbed it as well.

As he ran back towards the trees, he heard rustling from behind him. Stomach dropping, he pushed himself to run harder, gritting his teeth at the way the new backpack thumped painfully against his spine.

He dove into the bushes right as the girl from 4 burst out of the opposite treeline. Her face was twisted into a scowl, and she swung her sword as she ran back towards the Cornucopia to see if anything had been stolen.

Wilbur scrambled further back into the shadows, watching the shock wash over her as she realized the landmines were gone.

"SHIT!" She screamed, stabbing her sword into the dirt.

Wilbur had to bite back a laugh at her frustration. As tempting as it was to sit and watch her get all pissed off about how she'd fucked up, he knew he had to hurry up and get back to his

and Fundy's meeting spot.

He watched the sky, noting the second fire being lit, and then the third. By the time the fourth was sending white smoke high into the sea of blue above his head, he was almost back at the campsite, unable to stop smiling at how well that had worked out.

When Wilbur came trudging back into the camp, he immediately spotted a head of red hair by the creek. Fundy whipped around at his footsteps, eyes widening when he saw the second bag Wilbur was carrying.

"You did it?!" Fundy asked, rushing over to grab the backpack from Wilbur.

"Sure did. I got lucky because another tribute distracted the guard for me, so I was able to run and grab the mines without any problems," Wilbur explained. "Also, I got this," he then added, holding up the pack of jerky.

Fundy beamed at the loot, but ignored the jerky in favor of the backpack full of bombs.

"This is amazing, holy shit!" Digging into the bag, he pulled out one of the silver mines, running his hands over the ridged metal and nodding to himself. "Yeah, this shouldn't be hard to turn back on. I could probably show you how to do it too."

Plopping down on the forest floor next to Fundy, sighing in relief at his aching legs finally getting a break, Wilbur nodded. "Teach me then."

A few minutes later, Fundy had exposed the wiring on the bottom part of the mine, and was showing Wilbur which wires needed to go where to reactivate the detonator. To Wilbur's surprise, it wasn't all that complicated, although he never would've been able to figure it out on his own.

The forest around them was quiet. Mockingjays were singing above their heads, the creek was babbling softly, and a faint breeze was stirring the leaves under their feet. Despite Wilbur's aching back and legs, he couldn't stop smiling at how well things had gone. Their plan was going to work. They were actually going to get a leg up on the Careers.

"I'm not going to activate it right now, because we obviously don't want to have to carry a live bomb with us. But once it's activated, you'll be able to tell because this red light right here will be on," Fundy explained, pointing at a small dot on the bottom of the device. "Then, when you push on the pressure plate on top, it'll activate."

Wilbur opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off by the sound of pounding footsteps.

Whipping his head up, Wilbur froze when he locked eyes with the boy from 1 sprinting towards them. He opened his mouth to warn Fundy, reaching over to try and push him down, but it all happened so fast.

The boy skidded to a stop a few yards away from them. At the same time he lifted his hand, Wilbur lifted his crossbow.

Something black and sharp flew towards him and Fundy. Wilbur pressed the trigger on the crossbow without a second thought.

A crossbow bolt embedded itself in the boy's chest. His eyes widened, staring at Wilbur in shock for a moment, before he dropped to his knees. Then, he fell limp onto his back like a doll.

Wilbur just killed someone.

Wilbur *killed* someone.

But he couldn't think about that right now. He whipped his head around, mouth open to ask Fundy if he was okay, but the words died on his lips the moment his eyes actually fell on the boy.

The sharp black thing Wilbur had seen the boy throw was a knife. It was a knife that was sticking out of Fundy's stomach, and a patch of red was spreading across the grey fabric of Fundy's shirt.

Fundy was staring at the knife in his gut with a glazed expression, slowly reaching for the weapon and pulling it out without blinking.

Wilbur barely managed to catch him as his legs gave out from under him.

"Fucking shit, no no no," Wilbur was stammering, reaching down to try and press his hand against the bleeding wound. "Fundy? Fundy, can you hear me?"

"That... that guy was an asshole," Fundy said quietly, brown eyes staring at the canopy of leaves above his head.

"You're gonna be okay, Fundy, alright?" Wilbur said in a shaky voice, his thoughts racing by too fast to make any sense of them. Fundy was hurt. Fundy was bleeding. Fundy was going to bleed out if Wilbur couldn't fix this. How the fuck was Wilbur supposed to fix this?

Fundy didn't reply, and the fear that lanced through Wilbur's chest was almost painful. "Fundy? Fundy c'mon, stay with me!"

"I'm tired, Wil," Fundy whispered, clearly struggling to meet his eyes. "I'm really tired."

Wilbur bit his tongue, the taste of iron filling his mouth as he struggled not to cry. "Don't go to sleep, Fundy, okay? Please, I know you're tired, but you can't sleep right now."

"I-I'm scared," Fundy continued, tears now pouring down his cheeks. "I don't want to die."

"You're not going to die," Wilbur told him, although the blood that was now soaking his hands said otherwise. "You just- you have to stay awake, okay?"

"I can't," the boy whispered, his voice barely audible. "It hurts and I just wanna sleep."

Wilbur's face was now also covered in hot tears, and he was struggling to suppress the sobs already working their way up his chest. "I'm so sorry. It's not gonna hurt for much longer, sweetheart. I promise."

Fundy's breathing was starting to stutter, and he reached out to grab Wilbur's hand, although his grip was so feeble, Wilbur could barely even feel the pressure.

"You-You have to win, okay?" Fundy said after a moment, his voice cracking.

A tear from Wilbur's face dripped onto Fundy's cheek. "I promise I'll try to win," he whispered.

Fundy smiled, although it was weak. "Okay, good," he whispered. "C-Can I ask one more thing?"

"Anything," Wilbur said immediately.

Fundy took another shaky breath. "Can you sing for me? I know you- that you said you didn't sing, but I think you would have a nice voice."

A broken sob left Wilbur's mouth at that. He'd told the Capitol he didn't sing, because his singing wasn't for them. But he could sing for Fundy.

Taking a shaky breath to try and steady himself, Wilbur thought of an old lullaby his mother used to sing to him when he was little.

"Deep in the meadow, under the willow," Wilbur started, his voice hitching with tears, *"a bed of grass, a soft green pillow."*

Fundy let out a sigh at the song, his breathing slowing as he let his eyes flutter shut.

"Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes."

A small smile quirked the corners of Fundy's lips.

"And when they open again, the sun will rise."

With one final breath, Fundy went limp in his arms, and Wilbur's song broke off into ragged sobs.



Wilbur felt like he was lost after Fundy's death.

It took hours for him to calm down enough to actually realize that he'd killed another tribute. He scrubbed his hands in the creek over and over again until his hands were raw, desperately trying to make sure blood was no longer under his nails, although it felt as though they were now stained permanently.

Only a few minutes after Fundy had taken his last breath, there had been a soft pinging coming from the sky. A small, silver package floated down from a white parachute, landing right next to Wilbur's hands. It was a sponsor package.

Wilbur hadn't even realized he had sponsors. This was the first package he'd gotten in the entire Games.

He opened up the small tin, and bile rose in his throat when he saw the pot of healing cream that sat inside. It was the expensive kind of healing cream, the stuff you could only find in the wealthiest parts of the Capitol. This stuff could heal a wound like Fundy's in seconds.

Wilbur wanted to throw it out, but he wasn't stupid. This was an incredibly valuable thing to have. Wasting it would be a crime.

That night, he refused to look at the sky when Fundy and the other tribute's faces were displayed with the anthem playing behind them.

His sleeping bag felt far too cold without Fundy's small figure curled against him. Wilbur stared at the digital projection of stars above his head, unable to do anything but play that moment on repeat in his mind.

If he had just grabbed his crossbow faster, if he had realized the boy had thrown a knife and shoved Fundy away, if he hadn't even come up with that stupid damn plan to lead the Careers into the forest in the first place, maybe... maybe Fundy would be alive right now.

It was going to happen eventually. He knew that. But it didn't make it hurt any less.

The promise he'd made to Fundy also kept echoing in his ears. Now he had promised three people he was going to try and win. But how was he supposed to just go back to what he was doing before? How was he supposed to just move on from the fact that Fundy was *dead*?

The silence mocked Wilbur the next day. He had already grown accustomed to listening to Fundy excitedly tell him about some circuit board he'd built, or argue with him about which berries they were going to have with their dinner. The soft birdsong above his head was mocking him, and as the sun moved through the sky, Wilbur got the urge to scream.

He didn't though. He shoved down the anger, the pain, the frustration at how useless he'd been at protecting his ally—his friend. He bottled it up inside of himself, and tried to think of where he had to go from here.

The bag of landmines also mocked him, reminding him of what he'd given up for it. He had to use it, if anything, as a way to show Fundy it hadn't been a waste. But it wasn't something he was eager to do.

Still though, between the moments where he was suffocated by grief, a plan started to form in Wilbur's mind.

Days passed. More cannons boomed. Although he stopped watching the sky at night, he was pretty sure it was only him, the Careers, and that girl he'd seen stealing from the Cornucopia

now.

He couldn't remember the last time a tribute from 12 had lasted this long. If he ended up dying, at least he'd be remembered for that.

By the time he was ready to put his plan into action, the swirling grief that had threatened to consume him had simmered into a burning rage. He hated this. He hated the entire concept of the goddamn Games. Fundy was a child who didn't deserve to die, and Wilbur hated that they'd all been forced in here by the goddamn government. But even more, he hated that if he wanted to get home, he had to play along with it. Had to be one of their puppets.

It made him sick. But he played into it all the same, because he had no other choice.

After packing up his camp, Wilbur spent a day sticking to the trees, watching the forest floor for any sign of the thief girl he'd seen before. When he found her, he wasn't sure if he should've been relieved or upset. Relieved that he could finally put his plan into action, but upset at what that entailed.

It was a cruel thing he was doing, but this was the place for cruelty. Kindness got you a knife in the stomach. Cruelty was how you won.

The thief girl was a forager for the most part, sticking near a small pond and only venturing out to collect berries. But Wilbur knew she was a thief, which meant that if he tempted her with something to steal, she would take advantage of what would seem like a great opportunity.

It was all too easy to activate the first land mine. He did it in the dead of night, when he knew the thief was sleeping. Taking out the last cooked rabbit he had saved, he left that and a few other random items strewn about just close enough to her campsite that she would definitely see it when she went looking for breakfast, but not too close that she would get suspicious. Then, he buried the landmine right next to the rabbit, and tried to ignore the bile rising in his throat as he ran towards the clearing.

The Careers were still gathered in the Cornucopia, although there were only three of them now. The girl from 2, the boy from 2, and the girl from 4. They didn't notice Wilbur as he waited in the bushes, watching the sky fade from black to grey as the sun began to rise.

The sky was a soft shade of pink when a loud explosion echoed through the air.

The three Careers all leapt to their feet at once, looking completely alert despite the fact that two of them had been dead asleep. Their heads whipped around wildly, shouting to each other about what the hell that could've been.

As the sound of the explosion faded, it was quickly followed by a cannon, making Wilbur wince. The Careers spotted the black smoke rising up from the trees and grabbed their weapons, no guard staying behind this time.

Just like Wilbur had predicted. They assumed that he had been nearby when the explosion killed the girl, and they figured since they were now the only four left in the arena, there was

no point in leaving a guard for their stuff.

Now it was time for the hard part.

Wilbur didn't run over to the Cornucopia. Instead, he walked as carefully as he could, doing his best not to shift the bag holding the now active landmines too much. Once he got to the mouth of the metal horn, he put the bag down and dropped to his knees, before he began to dig.

It wasn't the most elegant plan, but it was what he came up with. He buried the landmines all around the front of the Cornucopia, struggling to make the mounds look natural. He didn't know why he thought it'd be easy to make them hard to notice.

Still, he did the best he could. Except he was gently pushing dirt over the last one when he heard a shout from the treeline.

"It's him!" The girl from 2 screamed. "He's at the Cornucopia!"

Jumping to his feet, Wilbur froze as he watched the Careers sprint across the clearing towards him. It was too soon. He was supposed to be far away from here by the time the Careers came back. But now they had seen him. They had seen him and if he tried to run now, they were going to chase him, and not come towards the Cornucopia.

Even if he did manage to get away, which was unlikely enough as it was, when the Careers came back to their base, they'd notice the mounds of dirt all around their food. There was no way they'd fall for that trap, and Fundy's death would've been for nothing.

But right now, they weren't looking at the ground. The three of them had their eyes locked on him, sprinting at full speed where he was standing right next to all the active landmines.

If Wilbur didn't move, he was going to be killed by his own trap. But the Careers would die too, and then there'd be no victor for the Hunger Games.

In that moment, Wilbur realized this was how he could get what he wanted. While he'd have to break his promises, he wouldn't be playing along with the Capitol either. The Games needed a victor, and if they didn't have one... well, that was the best revenge he could hope for, now wasn't it?

Maybe it was selfish to decide that if he was going down, these three other tributes had to go down with him. But this was who the Games made you become. Selfish murderers. At least this way, he could get one last fuck you in to the Capitol.

So instead of trying to run, Wilbur felt a manic smile spread across his cheeks.

"It was never meant to be," Wilbur said, stretching his arms out as if they were a pair of wings.

There was the sound of a distinctive *click!* as the girl from 4 stepped on the first mine.

Then, the world exploded into flame.

Everything hurt.

That was the only thing Wilbur could think of as he blinked open sticky eyes, tears running down his cheeks while acrid smoke swirled above him. Every breath felt like knives were being shoved down his throat, and he couldn't even feel most of his chest and arms. His legs were screaming in agony though, and he was pretty sure that they were broken.

His ears were ringing so loudly, the sound of the cannons booming was nothing more than background noise to him.

Black smoke clouded most of his vision, and Wilbur wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry as he counted three cannons. He'd done it. He'd killed the others, and now he was going to die too. Using his death to fuck over the sick assholes who ran these Games was exactly what he wanted.

But he wished he could've gotten the chance to apologize to Phil and Tommy. He broke his promise, and Tommy was never going to forgive him now.

Wilbur took another ragged breath, whimpering as searing hot pain ran through his chest. His eyes were growing heavy, and now he understood why Fundy had had such a hard time staying awake at the end.

Through the ringing in his ears, Wilbur could make out a faint voice as he let his eyes flutter shut.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the winner of the 74th annual Hunger Games!"

There was a white light behind Wilbur's eyelids, and he slipped into the void without any struggle.

Chapter End Notes

I WANT TO CLARIFY WILBUR ISN'T DEAD I would've tagged this fic MCD if he did, he just *almost* died

but anyway uhh... lmk if you cried lmao I got so emotional writing this whole section

hope you guys enjoyed! please please let me know what you thought down in the comments, you've all been so lovely with that so far and every comment makes me so happy. and don't worry I'll be posting the final chapter tomorrow so you won't have to wait long for that

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

home

Chapter Summary

The winner of the 74th annual Hunger Games goes home.

Chapter Notes

hi everyone i am here with the final chapter of my hunger games au!

now this was a complete labor of love on my end. I wrote this because I loved the hunger games and wanted to write my own version of it, with a specific focus on what happens after the Games are over. This chapter in itself has some very dark moments, so again please make sure you've read the tags on this fic

anyway thank you all for the love you've given this fic so far, I'm so glad some people are enjoying it so much! after this we'll get back to our regular content posting, with my focus going back to clinic and also finishing the sequel to the fae au

hope you guys enjoy this!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur woke up to the smell of antiseptic and the sound of beeping machines.

Wait. That wasn't right.

He tried to lift his arm, but his limbs felt like they weighed thousands of pounds. Silky sheets were cradling him against a soft mattress, and Wilbur tried to frown, but it was a struggle to even move his face.

He was supposed to be dead. Was this what death was? A soft place to lie down, but no way to move? Being trapped in his own head for the rest of eternity?

It had to be hell. Wilbur deserved hell after what he'd done. The explosions still rang in his ears, and when he focused, he was pretty sure he could still feel the heat on his chest from the flames that had burnt him to a crisp.

As he slowly became more awake though, he realized he could feel other things as well. There was a dull pain in the crook of his elbow, and every breath was a struggle to take. The beeping machines were rhythmic, matching in time with the steady thumping in his chest.

...his heart was pumping.

His heart shouldn't be pumping right now.

He was dead.

Dead people didn't have heartbeats.

Wilbur's eyes flew open, but he gasped and squeezed them shut immediately against the harsh lights that pierced his vision. Without meaning to, he let out a weak whimper, and he heard someone shift beside him.

"Wilbur?" The voice was deep, steady, and all too familiar. "Wilbur, are you awake?"

Wilbur didn't want to open his eyes again. He didn't want to say yes. He wasn't supposed to be alive. He tried to die in that arena, but if Techno was talking to him, that could only mean he'd failed at his final mission.

"C'mon Wil, I know you're awake. Your heart monitor is going crazy."

Sure enough, the beeping had grown faster, and was now ringing incessantly as he struggled to control his breathing.

Shit. He hadn't died.

Blinking open his eyes again, Wilbur winced at the pain, but it wasn't as bad as the first time. Keeping his eyes narrowed, he waited a few seconds for his vision to adjust, and soon the pain faded to a tolerable level.

Opening his eyes fully, Wilbur glanced around the room, noticing how things seemed... fuzzier than they should've been.

A blurry face leaned in front of him, and Wilbur was only able to tell it was Techno because of the pink hair.

"Why can't I see shit?" Wilbur asked, wincing at how his voice was so hoarse, he sounded like a complete stranger to himself. "It's all fuzzy."

"Your eyes were damaged in the explosion. The Capitol did what they could, but you're gonna need glasses for the rest of your life," Techno explained. "But to be fair, pretty much every part of you was messed up by those landmines."

Sighing, Wilbur tipped his head back to look at the ceiling. "Please tell me this is some strange, post-death hallucination," he whispered, tasting ash on his tongue.

"It's not. You're alive, Wilbur. You won the Games," Techno told him.

He was alive. He was alive because he'd killed all those people. He was alive and Fundy wasn't.

“I didn’t want to win,” Wilbur admitted, his voice cracking as a tear fell down his cheek. “I thought I was going to die in that explosion.”

Techno was silent at that.

“Why did they bring me back?” He asked, getting louder as more tears burned in his eyes. “I-I wanted to die in that arena! I didn’t want the Capitol to have their victor!”

There was a soft shushing noise from Techno, and Wilbur felt a gentle hand rest on his shoulder. “Don’t say that,” Techno whispered to him, leaning close enough so that Wilbur could smell his floral shampoo. “*Never* say that out loud. Not again. As far as they know, you thought standing near the Cornucopia would protect you from the worst of the explosion, got it?”

A sob broke from Wilbur’s chest, making more pain flare from his ragged throat. “B-But I was supposed to die!”

“But you didn’t. And you have to live with that now.”

Fuck. *Fuck*. Wilbur didn’t want this. He was going to have to go back to 12 now and look into his little brother’s face after having killed five people. He was going to have to meet his father’s eyes, both of them knowing he was a murderer. Everyone in the country knew what he did. He was never going to be able to escape it.

“How am I supposed to live with this?” Wilbur begged, his voice coming out in a pathetic whine. “How the fuck am I supposed to go back home now?!”

It was getting hard to breathe again, but Wilbur was startled out of his crying when he felt himself get pulled into a warm chest. Strong arms wrapped around him, and Wilbur hid his face in Techno’s shoulder immediately.

“I’m sorry. They don’t tell you that the hardest part isn’t winning the Games,” Techno whispered in his ear. “It’s everything after.”

Clinging to Techno like a lifeline, Wilbur let himself sob into his shoulder.

↑ ↑ ↑

Wilbur was in a haze.

After he had recovered (mostly) from his injuries, he was brought back to Bad’s interview chair to go through the ‘highlights’ of the 74th Games. He was all dressed up for a pageant again, wearing a shimmering grey suit that had been specifically tailored to hide the burn scars that criss-crossed his entire chest and parts of his arms, along with padded shoulders to give the illusion that he hadn’t lost a shit ton of weight during his time in the Games. Along with that, he was given a pair of circular wire-framed glasses specially designed to correct his permanently-damaged vision, and he hated how they were a reminder that he was going to be dependent on the Capitol for the rest of his life.

Throughout the entire two hours of watching the highlights reel, he had to smile and make polite comments about moments that had already made him wake up screaming every night while he was in the hospital.

There was an entire section dedicated to him and Fundy. His anger returned when he couldn't stop from tearing up in front of the cameras, and thankfully Bad was kind enough to have them skip through Fundy's death so Wilbur wouldn't have to relive it.

He felt like he was on auto-pilot. When he walked off stage, Techno slung an arm over his shoulder and told him that he did good, but Wilbur barely registered the words.

The train ride home was the same way. Wilbur wandered around the cars without any destination in mind, trailing his fingers along the windows, watching the scenery flash by in a blur. For once, Techno was the talkative one of the two of them, trying to fill the heavy silence by telling Wilbur about old myths he'd read over the years. Eret, who Wilbur hadn't spoken much to since the Reaping, was ecstatic at having another victor from 12, and constantly fluttered around Wilbur, asking him if he needed anything or if he was excited to be going home.

Despite the dread that was pooling in his gut at the idea of having to face his family again, Wilbur had to admit, there was a part of him that was eager to get off the train and step into 12 again. He wanted to feel Tommy's skinny arms wrapped around his waist, he wanted to hear Phil's soft voice telling him everything was going to be alright.

He might not get that. He still didn't know what his family would think of him after what he had done.

There was a cheering crowd waiting at the train station for him. When Wilbur stepped out, he saw familiar faces all waving at him, clapping for him, as if he was some kind of hero. Nausea rose up in him at the sight, and he was almost tempted to turn back around and go back into the train so he could hide until they all left.

But then, there was a familiar high-pitched voice.

“WIL!”

And there was Tommy. Golden-haired Tommy with the biggest smile Wilbur had ever seen stretching his cheeks. He crashed into Wilbur without any hesitation, squeezing him as tightly as he could and shoving his face into his chest.

Tears burned in Wilbur's eyes again. Even if nothing felt the same anymore, even if he had been begging to die only a few days earlier... he was glad he kept his promises to his little brother. He was never going to have to go in the Games now, and Wilbur had come back to him.

The crowd's cheering faded to the back of Wilbur's mind as he pulled Tommy close, burying his face in his hair so the cameras live streaming this to the Capitol wouldn't see him cry.

There was a soft hand brushing a tear from his cheek, and Wilbur glanced up to see Phil giving him a gentle look. His father had already been crying it seemed, as evidenced by the red rimming his eyes, but there was no anger or disgust in his faded baby blue gaze. Only relief and love.

Lifting up one arm away from Tommy, Wilbur dragged his dad into their hug, and for a moment, breathing was easy again.

↑ ↑ ↑

Things weren't the same.

For one thing, they no longer had to worry about money. Instead of Phil having to spend all his time hunting for food or foraging for his apothecary herbs, they now could just go to the market and buy whatever they wanted. Along with that, they had been moved out of their scrappy little shed, and were placed into one of the many vacant mansions in Victor's Village. While the homes were nice, it was eerie how empty the rows of houses were, and it almost reminded Wilbur of a graveyard.

There were more subtle ways in which things were different as well. Namely, regarding Wilbur himself.

There was the physical stuff. The glasses, the scars, the fact that his hands shook almost constantly. But then there was the invisible stuff as well, and Wilbur would argue that was worse.

He wasn't the same. Although he tried his best to slot himself back into the role of Wilbur Soot, eighteen year old from District 12, it felt like he'd been shoved into a stranger's body and let loose to puppet himself as best he could. He had to remember how to joke around like Old Wilbur, and smile like Old Wilbur, and hug like Old Wilbur. It was exhausting.

To Wilbur's relief though, almost none of that applied to Tommy. With Tommy, it was easy to slip back into the skin of Old Wilbur. He could wrap his arms around Tommy and bury his face in his soft hair, and for a moment, things would be the way they used to. New Wilbur would go back to being Old Wilbur, and smiles wouldn't be something he had to force.

But those were only moments. Nothing more.

Neither Phil or Tommy commented on his change in behavior since coming back from the Games, but Wilbur saw it plain as day. He was quick to anger, more prone to speaking without thinking. He struggled to focus on basic tasks, like skinning rabbits (it still tasted better than the stuff they bought at the market) or crushing herbs for poultices. He was constantly checking over his shoulder, as if he was still listening for the sound of boots crushing the leaves on the forest floor. While he tried his best to suppress these behaviors when he noticed them, he knew Tommy and Phil saw them all the same.

To his surprise, neither of them asked him about the Games. They didn't mention the landmines, they didn't mention the killing, and they didn't mention Fundy. When Wilbur asked if they had watched everything that went down, Phil told him that they never turned the

TV off, and they slept in shifts so they wouldn't risk missing anything. So they knew full well the extent of what he did. They just... didn't ask.

Wilbur suspected this was Phil's doing. Phil had always favored the idea of not pushing someone to talk about something they didn't want to, and while Tommy was certainly more nosy, Phil seemed to have drilled it into his head not to ask Wilbur anything. He could tell that his little brother had questions. Sometimes, he would give Wilbur this look, his mouth slightly open as he prepared to voice his thoughts, but then he would snap it shut and shake his head before walking away.

Wilbur wasn't sure if he wanted them to ask about it or not. On the one hand, he hated this feeling of walking on eggshells anytime certain subjects came up. On the other hand, he wasn't sure if he could even talk about the Games without falling apart at the seams, and he didn't want his father and brother to have to pick up the pieces of him.

Techno told him it would get easier over time. A month passed, and Wilbur was starting to think that was a lie.

To his frustration, as the days passed by, Wilbur started having *more* nightmares about the Games instead of less. It was so common for Wilbur to wake up screaming that both Phil and Tommy slept through it now half the time, and Wilbur preferred it that way. He didn't want to have to be coddled like a toddler after having nightmares. He just wanted space to calm himself down, and pretend like he could fall back asleep.

One night though, the routine changed.

Wilbur woke up screaming again, his mind's eye flashing with blood staining Fundy's shirt. Sobs wracked his body as he stared at his hands in front of his face, the pale fingers barely visible in the darkness. There was no blood on them, but he could still *feel* it. Hot, sticky, and running through his fingers as he desperately tried to stop Fundy from bleeding out.

He tried reminding himself that he was awake, that he wasn't back there anymore and there was no blood on his hands. But his heart rate only picked up, his breaths coming faster as his half-asleep mind began to spiral into full on panic.

Bringing his knees up to his chest, Wilbur twisted his fingers into his hair, whines breaking past his lips as his panic only grew worse. He'd had panic attacks in the past, but never like this. Never this violent. He couldn't breathe. Every breath was pained as air worked its way through his ragged throat, like it had been for the first few days after he'd gotten out of the Games. And no matter how deeply he breathed in, his lungs were still screaming, the smell of smoke filling his nose.

So caught up in his panic attack, Wilbur didn't hear the door open, or notice a figure rush in. It was only when something gold appeared in front of his face, and he could faintly hear someone calling his name, that he realized Tommy had come into his room.

"Wilbur? Wilbur, can you hear me?" Tommy was asking, sitting on the comforter in front of him. His blue eyes were reminiscent of an owl—wide, unblinking, and tinted with fear.

Gritting his teeth, Wilbur forced himself to nod, because he knew trying to speak wasn't a good idea right now. He was still crying, his breath coming far too fast to actually get any oxygen in his lungs.

"Okay, that's good," Tommy said, scooting a bit closer to him. "That's really good, Wil. Do you wanna try matching my breathing?"

Red hot shame washed over Wilbur as he nodded again. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. He was supposed to comfort Tommy after nightmares, not the other way around.

But even still, he was desperately looking for something to cling onto, some small scrap of the present to pull him out of his mind. And right now, the best thing he had was Tommy.

Tommy counted his breaths, going in for four seconds, and out for four seconds. Wilbur did his best to match it, although it was nearly impossible at first. But Tommy was surprisingly patient, just counting over and over again, watching as Wilbur's breathing slowly improved.

Soon, Wilbur was still crying, but he could breathe again. Some of the fear faded from Tommy's eyes, and he stretched out one of his hands.

"Can I grab your hand?" He asked softly.

Wilbur nodded, reaching out and wrapping his fingers around Tommy's probably much tighter than he needed to. He buried his face in his knees, counting his breathing in his head as he clung onto Tommy like a lifeline.

"I'm sorry," Wilbur whispered after a few more minutes of this, lifting his head again. "You shouldn't have to see me like this."

Tommy frowned. "What, would you rather I just let you deal with a super violent panic attack like that alone?"

"I shouldn't be having panic attacks like this," Wilbur said, his voice cracking. "I should be getting better so I can go back to being the older brother you know, but I'm just getting worse and it's so fucking frustrating!"

Before he could hide his face again, Tommy moved forward, wrapping his arms around Wilbur's back and shoving Wilbur's face in his shoulder.

"Don't be a fucking idiot," Tommy hissed, although his tone was a sharp contrast to how tightly he was hugging him. "You're still my older brother, that's never changed."

Straightening out his legs again, Wilbur pulled Tommy closer while shifting a bit so the hug was more comfortable for both of them. "I'm not though. I'm not acting like your older brother. I'm supposed to be the one who comforts you, not the other way around," he argued, his voice muffled by Tommy's shirt.

"I'm not a baby. I can comfort you just as well as you comfort me," Tommy pointed out.

"But you shouldn't have to," Wilbur pushed.

“But I want to,” Tommy shot back.

A pause.

“Please, just let me help,” Tommy then whispered.

And Wilbur... was so tired. So goddamn tired. Physically and mentally.

He didn’t have the strength to say no to Tommy. So he relaxed into the hug, and stopped choking back his tears. Tommy didn’t say anything as the fabric on his shoulder got more and more damp, just continued to hug Wilbur just as tightly as Wilbur was hugging him.

Wilbur wasn’t in the Games anymore. He was here, and he had his little brother wrapped in his arms. Right now, Tommy was his anchor, tethering him to the present and keeping him from drifting away into his own mind once more.

Time passed. Wilbur wasn’t sure how long. But soon, his racing thoughts slowed down, and the tears pouring down his cheeks finally dried out. His chest ached from sobbing, and his mouth felt like it had been filled with cotton, but he was okay again.

Somehow, Wilbur found himself laying back against his pillows, Tommy curled into his side with his head on Wilbur’s chest. Wilbur was staring at his ceiling, absently running his fingers through Tommy’s hair as he tried to ignore the headache throbbing behind his eyes.

“Wilby?” Tommy suddenly spoke up, having been quiet for a little while.

Something inside of Wilbur melted at Tommy using that nickname for him—it was something he called Wilbur when he was little, and only used it now when he was either sleepy or sick.

“Yeah?” Wilbur whispered back, his voice hoarse from all the crying.

“Can... can I...” Tommy trailed off, shifting a little against Wilbur’s side, and Wilbur could see he was frowning. “Never mind.”

Wilbur had a feeling he knew what Tommy was going to say.

“You can ask me about it,” Wilbur told him softly. “I know Dad said you shouldn’t, but if you want to ask me about the Games, you can.”

“Are you sure?” Tommy asked, tilting his head back to look at Wilbur.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” After his panic attack, Wilbur was too tired to feel any more anxiety. If Tommy was ever going to ask him about the Games, it should be now.

“Okay,” Tommy whispered, moving his head further back into the hand trailing through his hair. “Can I ask what your nightmare was about?”

“It... it was about Fundy,” Wilbur admitted, swallowing down a lump in his throat. “It was when he died.”

“Oh.” Tommy was silent for a moment, tapping his fingers against Wilbur’s chest. “Do you miss him?”

“Yeah, I do,” Wilbur said.

“Do you think he would’ve liked me?” Tommy then asked.

The question took Wilbur by surprise, but he supposed he should’ve expected it. After all, he had said in the arena how Fundy reminded him of his little brother, and had frequently thought about what it would have been like for the two of them to meet.

“I’m sure Fundy would’ve liked you. He would’ve thought you were funny,” Wilbur told him, thinking back to how hard Fundy had laughed at Wilbur’s bad jokes.

“He seemed nice, from what I saw on the TV,” Tommy murmured. “I wish I could’ve met him.”

“I wish you could’ve met him too.”

Another beat of silence. Wilbur wasn’t looking at Tommy’s face, and wondered if the boy had fallen asleep.

Then, in a voice almost too soft for Wilbur to make out,

“Do you regret volunteering for me?”

Wilbur stiffened, his hand going still in Tommy’s hair.

“No. Of course I don’t,” Wilbur said immediately. That wasn’t even a question. If he could go back in time and make the choice between going into the Games, or sending Tommy in there instead, he would go back to the Games without a second thought.

“But you-you got so hurt because you volunteered for me,” Tommy pointed out, his voice small.

“And it would’ve hurt so much more if I had to watch you go through what I did instead,” Wilbur told him.

Even if by some miracle Tommy had won the Games, which wouldn’t have happened considering the youngest person to ever win was fourteen and Tommy was only twelve, it still pained Wilbur to imagine Tommy coming back like he was now. Scarred, haunted, and irrevocably changed. The arena would’ve snuffed out the light from his eyes, and Wilbur wouldn’t have been able to live with the guilt.

Wilbur may have been a stranger to himself now, but one thing had stayed consistent between Old Wilbur and New Wilbur. He was always going to protect Tommy.

“I love you, Wilby,” Tommy whispered, hiding his face in Wilbur’s chest.

“I love you too,” Wilbur whispered in return.

It had been months. It was supposed to be better. He was supposed to be improving.

He wasn't.

Every day felt harder than the last. He was a puppet being held together by faulty stitches. One wrong tug and he was going to break apart into a million pieces.

District 12 didn't feel like his home anymore. The roads were familiar, the faces he knew, but it was as if he'd been transported to a mirror dimension. Nothing felt the same as it had.

His words still didn't come as easily as they used to. He still had to put effort into thinking about what Old Wilbur would've said, but it was getting harder and harder to remember what Old Wilbur was like. In all honesty, Wilbur was terrified that one day he was going to wake up, and he was going to have no idea who he was supposed to be.

He was terrified that that day had already come.

Exhaustion weighed down his bones. Not in the physical way, but the emotional way. He was tired of the acting, tired of not recognizing his own face in the mirror. His eyes had once been called warm, like hot chocolate. Now they were just brown. Cold, muddy brown.

Nightmares were still a constant. Tommy slept in bed with him nearly every night now, always there to hug him tight and remind him that he wasn't back in the arena. Wilbur hated that this was the only way he could get any sleep at all. Hated that his little brother had to do so much for him now.

Phil was doing his best to support him as well, but he'd always been bad at actually talking about elephants in the room. Instead of directing attention to how Wilbur was just getting worse, he tried to let Wilbur know he was there for him through actions rather than words. Running his fingers through Wilbur's hair when he brushed by, bringing him tea when Wilbur had a faraway look in his eyes, taking knives out of his hands when they were shaking too badly to hold them steady.

His family was trying so hard. So unbelievably hard to help him put himself back together. But it wasn't working, and Wilbur was just so, *so* tired. He didn't belong here anymore. Old Wilbur had belonged to 12, with his calloused fingertips and easy smiles. But New Wilbur didn't fit into the mold his old self had left behind, and it was getting too uncomfortable to bear for much longer.

The worst part of it was though, he didn't deserve his family's love and kindness. He was a murderer. He'd killed five people, three of them in a botched murder-suicide attempt. He was selfish. Horribly so. The Games had turned him inside out to bare his soul, and his soul had been unbelievably ugly. Phil and Tommy knew it. Everyone in 12 knew it. The entire country knew it. There was no hiding from the truth of who he was, and Wilbur couldn't stand people pretending like he deserved to be alive any longer.

Wilbur was selfish. He accepted this as part of himself. Which was why he told Tommy one night that he was fine to sleep in his own bed. That he was going to take some sleeping medication so he wouldn't wake up from nightmares. The lie flowed easier than any other words had since he'd gotten home.

There was a water tower in 12, not too far from Victor's Village. It was abandoned now, covered in peeling strips of baby blue paint, a relic of a time long gone. But still, it watched over the district like an old guard.

As a child, Wilbur had loved to climb up the rusty rungs of the ladder and watch the stars with his legs dangling over the ledge. Now, as Wilbur climbed the old ladder for the first time in nearly a decade, he couldn't help but notice that it was a perfectly clear night. Dozens and dozens of stars twinkled above his head like pinpricks against void, and a small part of Wilbur was grateful that he'd get to see something so beautiful before he saw nothing at all.

A strong breeze whipped around him at the top of the tower. Icy claws threaded under his coat, goosebumps rising along his arms as his boots clanged against the metal grid of the platform. Wilbur took a shaky breath as he approached the railing of the platform, looking down at the ground far, far below.

Carefully, Wilbur climbed over the railing so he was on the outside of it. His hands were white-knuckled as they gripped the rail behind him, and his blood roared in his ears as he stared at the ground waiting for him with outstretched arms.

He needed to let go. This was it. He had to finish what he failed to do back in the Games.

He couldn't.

Wilbur told his hands to let go of the railing, but they wouldn't cooperate. They stayed firmly latched around the rusty metal, and Wilbur let out a frustrated growl as he struggled to relax his grip.

He wanted to let go. He *needed* to let go. But he couldn't. Why the hell couldn't he do it?

A voice suddenly startled him out of his thoughts.

"Wilbur?"

Whipping his head around, Wilbur blanched when he saw his father standing on the platform behind him. Phil was staring at him with a mixture of shock and horror, eyes glancing up and down Wilbur's figure, noticing how he was on the outside of the railing instead of in.

"Phil, you-you weren't supposed to-" Fucking hell. This wasn't supposed to happen. Phil wasn't supposed to find him like this. He'd made sure to leave after both he and Tommy fell asleep. He didn't want either of them to see this.

"Wilbur... why?" Phil whispered, something terribly sad casting shadows across his face.

Wilbur grit his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut so he didn't have to meet Phil's gaze. "I'm sorry, but I just- I can't do it anymore. I don't deserve to be back here. Not after the things I

did.”

“You did what you had to to survive,” Phil said softly, taking a careful step towards him.

“B-But I didn’t!” Wilbur argued, tears burning in his eyes. “I killed five people!”

“Yes, so you could get back home,” Phil reminded him.

“But that’s not true,” Wilbur exclaimed, having to force the words out past the lump in his throat that was choking him. “I wasn’t trying to get home. Not at the end.”

Phil paused his steps toward him, and frowned. “What do you mean?”

A somewhat hysterical giggle slipped past Wilbur’s lips. “I knew I was too close to the landmines, Phil. I wasn’t trying to use the Cornucopia as protection against the blast. I wanted to kill all the other tributes and myself so the Games didn’t have a victor.”

A sharp gasp escaped Phil as the realization set in. He brought a hand up to his mouth, and Wilbur could see tears glittering in his own eyes. “Oh... oh Wil.”

“I-I was so fucking selfish, Phil! If I couldn’t win, I didn’t want anyone else to win either. How horrible of a fucking person does that make me?” Another hysterical laugh. “When I woke up, do you know what I did when I realized I was still alive?” Phil shook his head, and Wilbur tasted salt on his tongue. “I cried because I’d lived. Because I’d wanted to die in that arena, and I couldn’t even do that right.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this?” Phil whispered, taking another step closer so he was right behind Wilbur now.

Wilbur took a shaky breath. “Because I didn’t want you to realize what a monster I was.”

Phil’s eyes narrowed. “You’re not a monster, Wil.”

“But I am!” Wilbur shouted. “I’m a selfish monster and you deserve better than to have to live under the same roof as me!”

Breathing was a challenge now, his chest stuttering as his heart pounded in his ears. He glanced at the ground again, and found he still couldn’t get his hands to let go.

An idea formed in his head. A horrible, selfish idea, but he was a horrible selfish person anyway, so what did it matter?

“Phil,” he said, looking back up to meet his father’s eyes. “I-I can’t seem to make myself let go. I need you to push me.”

Phil made a strangled noise as if he’d been burnt. “Wh- but- no! I’m not pushing you!”

“Do it, Phil. Kill me,” Wilbur pleaded, caught somewhere between laughing and sobbing. “Please, I’m begging you, kill me now!”

“You’re my son!” Phil exclaimed, his own cheeks covered in tears.

“But I’m not!” Wilbur shouted, making Phil flinch. “I’m not the Wilbur who went into that arena, don’t you get it?! I’m not your son anymore! Your son wouldn’t have killed five people!”

Grief and pain swirled in Phil’s pale blue eyes, and he pressed his lips into a thin line as he met Wilbur’s gaze.

Slowly, his thin hand reached up, and with the gentleness that one would hold a flower with, Phil cupped his cheek.

“You’ll always be my son. Nothing is ever going to change that,” Phil whispered, swiping away Wilbur’s tears with his thumb. “Don’t blame yourself for what happened in that arena. You were put into a horrible situation you never should have been in, and you did what you felt you had to do. It’s not your fault you were forced to feel like your only way to win was to make sure the Games had no victor. It’s the Capitol’s fault for putting you there in the first place.”

The lump in his throat grew bigger, and Wilbur couldn’t help but lean into Phil’s gentle touch.

“It’s my fault,” he insisted, although it sounded more like a whine than anything else. “It has to be my fault. I’m a monster, you shouldn’t want me around.”

“Remember who the real enemy is. It’s not you, and it’s not the other tributes. It’s the Capitol,” Phil told him, something steely hardening his gaze. “You’re my son, and I’m always going to love you, no matter what. You’re not a monster in my eyes, and you never could be.”

Another sob broke from Wilbur’s chest. “B-But-”

“I’m not going to push you off this water tower because you don’t deserve to die, Wilbur. Just because you lived while those other twenty-three kids died doesn’t mean you need to die too.” Phil wiped more tears from his cheeks. “You deserve the chance to heal, and to grow up. To watch Tommy grow up. You deserve all of that and more.”

And... that was it.

There was no uncertainty in Phil’s voice. Although Wilbur wasn’t sure if he believed him, he latched onto those words like a drowning man.

“Dad,” Wilbur whimpered as he collapsed into Phil’s arms.

It was awkward trying to maneuver back over the railing with his dad’s arms holding him like he never wanted to let go, but they managed it. Once Wilbur was back on the platform, they both fell to their knees, Wilbur wrapping himself around his father as much as possible. Phil was holding him so tightly, it was hard to breathe, but Wilbur didn’t care. He needed this. He needed Phil to keep him from floating away.

And just like with Tommy after that panic attack, Wilbur let himself cry. He cried and cried, begging Phil for forgiveness even though Phil said there was nothing to apologize for. Although he was so much taller than his dad, he felt like a little kid again, all wrapped up in his father's arms, hidden away from the rest of the world.

By the time Wilbur pulled his face out of Phil's shoulder, the sky above them was brightening to a soft shade of grey. The mockingjay's songs could be heard echoing from the forest, and for the first time in a long while, it didn't sound like it was taunting him.

"Let's go home, Wil," Phil said, brushing the hair gently back from his face.

Wilbur nodded. "Okay. Let's go home."

↑ ↑ ↑

Things didn't immediately get better after that. They didn't get better for a long time, actually.

But they started to improve. Slowly, but surely, things got easier.

Wilbur stopped forcing himself to act exactly like he had before the Games. He was quieter now, his shoulders permanently weighed down by the memories of the Games. Genuine smiles were rare, laughter even moreso, but they weren't completely gone.

Six months after the Games, Wilbur had to go on a Victory Tour to each of the different districts, as was tradition for the latest victor. It was torturous for Wilbur to meet the families of the other tributes. Through tears he apologized to Fundy's family, and after his speech, his mother pushed her way through the crowd to hug him and thanked him for trying to protect her son.

It was more horrible pageantry from the Capitol, but Wilbur didn't spiral into self-hatred again. Techno was a steady presence by his side the entire tour, and by the time the tour wrapped up, Wilbur could confidently call Techno one of his closest friends.

And then he went home again. Where no one expected him to be the same, but that was okay.

He spent days wandering the forest outside 12 with Tommy and Tubbo by his side, showing the two of them the best places to forage. At one point, Wilbur found a familiar patch of sweet red berries, and instead of breaking down at the reminder, he found himself smiling instead.

They picked as many of the berries as they could. Their fingers were stained red, and none of them could stop giggling as they tossed the berries at each other's heads.

The nightmares stopped happening every night, but he still woke up screaming several times a week. Tommy always found his way into Wilbur's room when this happened, and just seeing his little brother's face usually was enough to calm him down enough to fall back asleep.

On Wilbur's nineteenth birthday, he found his old guitar, shoved into the back of his closet with a thick layer of dust on top of it. Carefully, he took it out, and wiped it down with a damp cloth. Then, with sunlight streaming through his window, he sang for the first time since he'd gotten home.

"Here it's safe, here it's warm. Here the daisies guard you from every harm."

As Wilbur sang, the door to his room creaked open, and Tommy popped his head in. Instead of stopping, he gestured for Tommy to come sit next to him, and played out the rest of the song with a smile on his face.

"Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true."

It wasn't great playing. He was long out of practice, the calluses on his fingertips having faded, his voice rough from lack of use. But it felt good to sing, and that in itself was enough.

"Here is the place where I love you."

Things weren't the same. They never would be the same again.

But they were okay, and that was enough.

Chapter End Notes

ok so some things of note, I don't think I'm ever gonna write a sequel to this but I left certain things open just in case I ever got the urge. namely, how few people I mentioned. I know a lot of people pictured niki as the girl from district 12 last chapter which I honestly did at some points as well, but if i were to ever write a sequel to this it would likely focus on the 75th quarter quell, and Niki in my head is a victor of the Games from a different district so she'd show up there lol, along with quite a few other familiar faces. Again, probably won't write a sequel, but we'll see!

anyway like I said in the beginning a/n this was really a work of love for me. I really felt a lot of emotions writing it, and I hope I gave you all a lot of emotions reading it! please let me know what you thought down in the comments, I read all of them and they really make my day <3

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees !

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